

# Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program Round 1: Lessons Learned on Partnerships with Education



## Context

In January 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced the HUD-funded [Continuums of Care](#) that were selected to be part of Round 1 of their [Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program \(YHDP\)](#): Anchorage, AK; Austin/Travis County (TX); Cincinnati/Hamilton County; Connecticut Balance of State (BoS); Grand Traverse, Antrim, Leelanau Counties (MI); Kentucky BoS; Ohio BoS; San Francisco, CA; Seattle/King County; and Watsonville/Santa Cruz City and County. These communities were charged with developing a Coordinated Community Plan (CCP) to prevent and end youth and young adult (YYA) homelessness that engages stakeholders from a myriad of systems, including housing, education, employment, child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) made a commitment from Fiscal Year 2017 to provide education-focused technical assistance (TA) to YHDP communities through the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE).

This brief highlights recurring themes and challenges identified by Round 1 communities<sup>1</sup> in building a true coordinated community response (with a particular focus on education partnerships) and recommended strategies for addressing these challenges.<sup>2</sup> These lessons learned from the first cohort have been shared with Round 1 communities and are being used to inform the provision of technical assistance to YHDP communities in Round 2 and beyond.

## Key Themes

YHDP Round 1 community stakeholders identified a number of recurring themes over the course of the development and initial implementation of their CCP. Themes included:

- **Differing priorities across systems**  
While YHDP Round 1 created an unprecedented opportunity for partnerships across systems working on issues of YYA homelessness, this opportunity meant that systems with diverse areas of focus would need to weave together their differing priorities into a unified vision.
- **Differing definitions of homelessness across systems**  
YHDP communities can only serve categories 1, 2, and 4 of the [HUD definition of homeless](#) unless HUD grants an exception to use 10% of YHDP funds on youth defined as homeless under other federal definitions. Round 1 communities referenced a desire to serve YYA experiencing homelessness under differing federal definitions, as well as the challenge involved in reconciling the differences between definitions.
- **Lack of clarity and equality of roles**  
Convening a group of diverse stakeholders can lead to individual partners wondering what role they should play in a coordinated community response. Education stakeholders expressed a feeling of lack of clarity in their roles and a desire to be treated as equal partners in YHDP work.
- **Insufficient capacity**  
Education (and other system) partners communicated frustration over their inability to engage in YHDP efforts at the level they desired and deemed necessary to advance the work. With full workloads already,

<sup>1</sup> This brief was informed by feedback received from a variety of YHDP community stakeholders, including local homeless assistance and education systems, youth and young adults with lived experience of homelessness, and HUD- and ED-funded technical assistance providers.

<sup>2</sup> A couple of things are worth noting about NCHE's provision of TA to Round 1 YHDP communities, and the challenges and recommendations explored in this brief. Firstly, many federal partners and local stakeholders have acknowledged that the demonstration nature of YHDP meant that Round 1 communities were embarking on pioneering work that inevitably led to a certain amount of "growing pains" in planning and carrying out YHDP work. Secondly, due to contractual timelines, NCHE began providing education-focused TA to Round 1 sites in late 2017; because Round 1 sites were announced in January of 2017 with intensive planning and collaboration beginning shortly thereafter, more intensive education engagement began relatively late in the planning process. Both of these dynamics may have contributed to some of the challenges identified in this brief.

education stakeholders hesitated to take on additional duties.

- **Collecting and sharing data across systems**

Many communities referenced the importance of leveraging data to craft their statement of need and inform ongoing work, but also referenced the challenge of sharing data across systems due to confidentiality restrictions. Communities also mentioned the challenge of interpreting and using data from diverse systems that may use different definitions of homeless or collection methodologies.

- **Serving minor youth**

Many YHDP partners historically have not served minors, creating unfamiliarity with the needs of these youth and how to navigate legal complexities related to confidentiality and consent.

- **Serving rural communities**

Rural communities faced logistical challenges coordinating YHDP work across large geographical areas with varying levels of infrastructure, accessibility, and transportation options. Similarly, while urban communities may only need to coordinate with a single child welfare agency or school district, rural communities mentioned the challenge of coordinating across many partners over an expansive geography.

- **Keeping up momentum over time**

Many communities noted the protracted timeline allotted for the development of the CCP and the project funding competition prior to any projects becoming operational and services being provided to YYA. This timeline is valuable and needed for the intensive planning and preparation communities must conduct to formulate a unified vision and path forward, but also may lead to lulls in energy and action.

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### Looking Ahead: Recommendations for Future Work

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Based on recurring themes and lessons learned, YHDP Round 1 stakeholders recommended a number of strategies for addressing identified challenges.

#### Creating unity among a diverse group of stakeholders

To address differing priorities across systems, communities recommend

- encouraging partners to learn about and recognize the important role of all participating stakeholders, and be willing to think beyond the “boundaries” of their system;
- leveraging built-in YHDP planning time to build consensus across systems, and engage in difficult but necessary conversations;
- identifying shared goals across stakeholders to foster agreement and overcome differences;
- prioritizing input from YYA with lived experience of homelessness regarding their goals and the supports they need from various community systems, including education; and
- developing memoranda of understanding (MOUs) across agencies to establish goals, roles, and responsibilities.

#### Navigating different definitions of homeless

To address different definitions of homeless across systems and related administrative and funding restrictions, communities recommend

- shifting the focus from definitional differences to the overall vision of what the YHDP CCP seeks to address, and identifying opportunities that exist within that broader vision to partner across systems and definitions;
- seeking flexible funding from other sources that would allow communities to serve YYA experiencing homelessness across all definitions;
- engaging partners and service providers not funded through HUD, as they may have broader eligibility parameters and be able to serve YYA who don’t meet the HUD definition of homeless;
- exploring more intentionally which couch-surfing/doubling-up YYA have the greatest need for services and [may qualify as homeless under HUD categories 2 \(at imminent risk\) or 4 \(fleeing danger\)](#);

- considering [requesting approval from HUD to serve YYA who meet category 3](#) of the HUD definition of homeless to provide for greater flexibility in using up to 10% of their awarded YHDP funds.

### Developing Role Clarity and Equality

To address lack of clarity and equality of roles, communities recommend

- maintaining an ongoing focus in YHDP work on mutual benefit and give-and-take among all partners and the systems they represent;
- including a standing education discussion/update item on all YHDP meeting agendas;
- ensuring representation of the education system in the site's governance and working group structure;
- including education and other non-housing goals as part of the site's accountability measures and Continued Quality Improvement (CQI) process; and
- working together to identify the ongoing role of system partners beyond the development of the CCP.

### Responding to Limited Capacity

To address insufficient capacity to engage in YHDP work at the desired or needed level, communities recommend

- investing in creating broad community buy-in to the YHDP vision, as this may bring in additional resources, including "people capacity" and more flexible external funding;
- creating a "regional support model" to help manage work across large geographical areas; and
- focusing on working smarter in partnership rather than harder, so that energy dedicated to YHDP work is "compensated" by a return on investment of benefit to the partner's system, work, clients, and possibly through being a recipient or subrecipient of YHDP funding.

### Collecting and Sharing Data across Systems

To improve the usage and sharing of various data sources, communities recommend

- developing a data working group to gather and analyze all available data;
- viewing diverse data sources as complementary rather than contradictory, with each source providing an additional lens to understand the overall picture of YYA homelessness in the community;
- partnering in data collection and analysis that goes beyond what each system manages independently;
- seeking creative ways to use aggregate or de-identified data to answer important questions; and
- exploring the implementation of integrated data systems, for example, those examined in resources from the [U.S. Department of Education](#) or the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

### Serving Minor Youth

To improve the planning and delivery of services to minor youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, communities recommend

- investing in building community awareness about the (often unrecognized) issue of youth homelessness;
- developing a working group specific to serving minors;
- engaging schools and other youth-serving agencies early, as they have extensive experience serving minors, and youth experiencing homelessness often feel most comfortable seeking help from them;
- adapting existing provider MOUs to be appropriate for serving minors, making sure to address legal concerns;
- determining the role of child welfare in responding to the needs of minor youth experiencing homelessness, as many minors hesitate to seek help if they think they must enter the foster care system; and
- including legal-focused technical assistance or partners in YHDP team work focused on serving minors.

### Serving Youth in Rural Communities

To improve the planning and delivery of services for youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas, communities recommend

- building in time and budgetary allowance for YHDP lead agency staff to meet and build trust with cross-system influencers, including from early care and education, K12, and higher education, in each of the communities covered by the YHDP;
- engaging partner agencies across multiple levels so that a commitment to YHDP work exists among staff working directly with YYA and those in a leadership role;
- developing consistent protocols for identification, referrals, and service delivery across all school district and other administrative boundaries within the YHDP.

### Maintaining Momentum over Time

To address potential lulls in energy and action during YHDP CCP and project planning, communities recommend

- using the “lull” that may occur as CCP development is winding down to engage education and other stakeholders in exploring partnership opportunities in project applications, design, and implementation;
- maintaining steady communication with system partners and community stakeholders throughout the various phases of CCP and project development and implementation; and
- developing and publicizing a calendar of events and opportunities to engage in YHDP work across the full YHDP “life cycle”, including stakeholder input and community awareness events, leadership meetings, and training opportunities.

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### Engaging TA providers in finding solutions

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Giving the pioneering nature of YHDP work and the systems changes that may be needed to develop and implement a coordinated community approach, communities may experience “growing pains” along the way. Fortunately, HUD and ED have funded the provision of technical assistance (TA) to support YHDP communities in identifying solutions. Communities from future YHDP rounds have the benefit of lessons learned from Round One communities and the ability to leverage the expertise of HUD- and ED-funded TA providers from the beginning of the planning phase to bring additional capacity and thought partnership to the site. Looking ahead, federal partners will continue to support implementation of and active engagement in targeted technical assistance across YHDP communities.

For more information about ED’s education TA, as provided through the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), contact [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).