



Building Child Welfare and Housing Partnerships to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness: Nashville's Alternative Response

Since January 2017, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has awarded [Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program \(YHDP\) grants](#) to 21 communities to develop and implement a coordinated community approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness, and a third round of funding will support up to 25 communities beginning in 2019. Addressing the intersection of youth homelessness and child welfare system involvement is critical to this work.

Some YHDP communities have begun to explore opportunities to engage child welfare partners around a coordinated response to best meet the needs of minor youth who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and our partners at the Corporation for Supportive Housing spoke with the team in Nashville, TN, about current and planned efforts to build an alternative response as part of their [coordinated community plan](#).

Overview: A Community Focus on Youth

In March 2016, at the request of the Oasis Center, a local runaway and homeless youth provider, the Metro Homeless Impact Division, Nashville's YHDP lead agency, began organizing the community around youth experiencing homelessness. In those early days, it was critical to ensure the buy-in and participation of all stakeholders, including the Tennessee Department of Children's Services and the Davidson County Court. To help bring these cross-system partners to the table and form a steering committee, the Metro Homeless Impact Division worked with the Oasis Center to create an agreement that was used among 17 youth and young adult services agencies and organizations in Nashville-Davidson County. The agreement provided assurance that the agencies and organizations did not intend to blame any system or organization for its failures and helped to unify all stakeholders under a singular mission to improve each organization's and system's ability to serve youth and young adults at risk of and experiencing homelessness.

Building an Alternative Response

1. Create opportunities for each youth-serving system to be part of decision-making and formalize the process.
2. Develop a specific goal focused on minor youth.
3. Identify system champions to lead implementation.
4. Build a pathway for minors that prevents system involvement.
5. Ensure adequate crisis housing.
6. Build a consistent response across all youth-serving systems.

The newly formed group created Nashville's first plan to prevent and end youth homelessness, **The Key Action Plan**. The Plan sought to establish a shared vision for a long-term solution for youth homelessness and included a series of "near-term" objectives that could be implemented within a 12-18 month period. By 2018, the committee had acted on several objectives and determined that participating in the YHDP process would accelerate the

community's work and improve their ability to authentically collaborate with youth through a newly formed Youth Action Board. When Nashville was selected for the YHDP grant, a new coordinating structure was needed to jumpstart the work ahead.

Community Planning Process

As part of the YHDP process, Metro Homeless Impact Division, Oasis Center, and the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (Continuum of Care Collaborative Applicant) partnered to 1) transform The Key Action Plan steering committee team into a formal committee of the Continuum of Care, and 2) to include youth and young adults with lived experience in the committee structure. The Department of Children's Services and the Davidson County Court were critical members of the newly formed Youth and Young Adult (YYA) committee. The YYA committee analyzed data from across systems, mapped the pathways out of homelessness for youth and young adults, modeled program and housing inventories and resources needed across the homelessness response system, and set actionable cross-system goals to create a coordinated community plan centered around the USICH [criteria and benchmarks](#) for achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness.



During the 8-month planning process, the YYA committee became keenly aware of the need to focus on unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness due to family conflict, behavioral health needs, and gang violence. These distinct groups of young people were increasingly interacting with the juvenile justice system and subsequently being placed in foster care at higher rates than their housed counterparts. The YYA committee spent several planning sessions learning to speak the language of the different systems being represented; understanding the strengths and weakness of each system's responses to youth and their families; exploring the resources each system could bring to the table; and rooting themselves in their agreed-upon vision to prevent and end homelessness. Following this concerted effort, a collaborative decision was made to dedicate YHDP funding to collectively build a new

intervention for unaccompanied minors. This intervention creates a response that is an alternative to juvenile detention, foster care, or shelter: an **"Alternative Response."**

An Alternative Response

The common language of Alternative Response helped the YYA committee envision a new approach across the multiple systems that serve youth and their families in Nashville. As a parallel process to the local competition for YHDP funding, the YYA committee established an unaccompanied minors subcommittee of system partners to further develop the Alternative Response. Key elements of the Alternative Response include:

- **A single point of entry** for minors experiencing housing instability that can take referrals from juvenile justice, child welfare, behavioral health, and schools.

- **A common assessment** that can help assess safety and risk for youth and determine the best pathway for family-based interventions and housing when necessary, as well as determine when child welfare involvement may be needed.
- **Case management and crisis resolution** services for youth and their families to help navigate and support young people back home or to an alternative safe and stable housing solution with an appropriate set of voluntary services that contribute to housing stability.
- **Crisis host homes** that can offer a safe alternative to shelter when a young person needs an immediate place to stay and cannot go home due to acute family conflict.
- **Case conferencing** to help coordinate access to and delivery of needed services across systems for youth and families to remain stably housed.

While developing the key elements of the Alternative Response, the subcommittee worked to ensure that the needs and goals of each of the systems were being met. For example, child welfare and court system partners identified the need for crisis host homes in order to avoid placing minors in foster care or detention unnecessarily when family conflict escalated and they could not safely return home immediately. The crisis housing allows for a “cooling-off” period and is paired with ongoing family-based support when the young person returns home.

While developing the core outcomes to track within the new Alternative Response, the subcommittee worked to ensure that each system’s priorities were represented. These outcomes include:

- Reducing the number of unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness (Homeless Services)
- Reducing the number of parents that request minors be detained or removed due to familial differences (Family Court)
- Reducing the number of older adolescents being removed from parental custody (Child Welfare)
- Increasing positive permanent connections for minor youth (All)
- Increasing access to services to help prevent detention, removals, and reduce runaway episodes (All)

Looking Ahead

Next steps include identification of a local non-profit to implement the Alternative Response. The Metro Homeless Impact Division and the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency developed a local Request for Proposals with the input of the YYA committee and the Youth Action Board to award YHDP funds. The selected non-profit will work with the YYA committee and the YAB to:

- Develop screening and referral practices across systems;
- Implement the common assessment process for minors;
- Identify the family-based and housing interventions young people will be referred to;
- Stand up crisis host homes; and
- Ensure funding for the intervention is shared across the multiple system partners and supplemented by private funding to ensure access to and coordination of services.

Learn More

When asked about guidance for other communities interested in building similar partnerships with child welfare systems, Nashville highlighted the following:

- **Include youth and young adults with lived experience in the planning process from the start**, listen to what they have to say, and act on their ideas. Their vision sparks action and holds all systems accountable for what is not working and what needs to change.
- **Acknowledge that each system has its own goals and its own way of responding to young people.** The best way to understand the range of systems and goals is to get everyone in a room and talk. Creating a safe space and putting a face to each system partner enabled frank conversations about system strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities.
- **Develop common language across systems.** The terminology “Alternative Response” helped to unify all the systems behind a shared understanding of the end goal.
- **Return to the joint vision** created as part of the initial planning process to remind everyone what the end goal is- even when the work gets tough. **It is possible to prevent and end youth homelessness, and we’re going to prove it!**
- **Dream big.** Allow young people and each system to explain what they think is needed. Do not be afraid to create a wish list, and then try to implement it over time with joint resources and other funding sources, including private funding.