



# Criteria and Benchmarks for Achieving the Goal of Ending Youth Homelessness

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and its member agencies have adopted a vision of what it means to end all homelessness, ensuring that it is a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience. This vision was included in the 2015 amendment to the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. This document provides specific criteria and benchmarks for ending unaccompanied youth homelessness, in order to help guide communities as they take action to achieve the goal through a [coordinated community response to youth homelessness](#).

## Purpose of the Criteria and Benchmarks

Criteria and benchmarks work together to provide a complete picture and an ongoing assessment of a community's response to homelessness. While the criteria focus on describing essential elements and accomplishments of the community's response, benchmarks serve as important indicators of whether and how effectively that system is working on an ongoing basis. Together, these criteria and benchmarks are intended to help communities drive down the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness to as close to zero as possible, while building long-term, lasting solutions that can effectively and efficiently respond to future needs.

Communities that have assessed their response to youth homelessness and concluded that they have met the criteria and benchmarks will have the opportunity to validate and confirm their achievement through a federal review process. During that process, we will consider a community's data and information holistically. For example, it may be possible for data to indicate that a community has achieved all of the benchmarks, while other information may indicate that the expectations of the criteria haven't been met. Or the benchmarks may indicate that a community's response is working efficiently, but it has not been in place long enough to have fully achieved the goal. [These tools can help you](#) as you work to achieve the goal and document and validate your community's claim.

Under the benchmarks section, federal partners are continuing to solicit stakeholder input and assess available data to support recommendations for one or more of the proposed indicators. Revised guidance will be posted to the Youth Criteria and Benchmarks webpage on the USICH website. These criteria and benchmarks represent our best thinking at this time. We will continue to review and evaluate their effectiveness as more communities approach and succeed in meeting the goal of ending youth homelessness.

## Criteria

USICH and the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development have developed the following set of community-level criteria for achieving an end to youth homelessness. These criteria, and the accompanying benchmarks, apply to all youth and young adults under the age of 25 who are unaccompanied by a parent, legal guardian, or caretaker and who meet any federal definition of homelessness.

**1. The community identifies all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.**

The community uses coordinated outreach, in-reach, multiple data sources, and other methods to identify and enumerate all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, spanning the community's entire geographical area. Specifically, while recognizing that youth experiencing homelessness may move among a variety of settings:

- a. The community literally identifies every unaccompanied youth who is unsheltered, in shelter, or in transitional housing settings or other residential programs for youth experiencing homelessness ; and,
- b. The community coordinates a comprehensive set of strategies, spanning schools, the child welfare system, including child protective services, the justice system, drop-in centers, hotlines and 2-1-1, and other youth-serving agencies and programs to identify unaccompanied youth who are doubled up or couch-surfing and considered homeless under any federal definition.

The community's efforts are tailored to the unique needs of particularly vulnerable youth.

**2. The community uses prevention and diversion strategies whenever possible, and otherwise provides immediate access to low-barrier crisis housing and services to any youth who needs and wants it.**

The community helps youth avoid the need for emergency shelter whenever possible by connecting and/or reunifying them with members of their family or other natural supports (as defined by each young person), providing support to the youth's identified family to help them stay at or return home, or through other prevention or diversion strategies. Youth and young adults who are unsheltered, fleeing an unsafe situation, or experiencing a housing crisis, can immediately access developmentally appropriate safety services, emergency shelters, host homes, or other temporary housing settings, as well as other forms of emergency assistance. Access to shelter or other temporary housing in the community includes an adequate supply and range of options that are not contingent on school attendance, sobriety, minimum income requirements, absence of a criminal record, or other unnecessary conditions, including options appropriate for particularly vulnerable youth.

**3. The community uses coordinated entry processes to effectively link all youth experiencing homelessness to housing and services solutions that are tailored to their needs.**

The community implements coordinated entry processes that include the full array of youth-serving systems and programs and uses assessment tools that are adapted for youth and appropriate for their circumstances. The provision of tailored housing and services solutions is driven by youth choice and includes a range of options, including: service-only interventions, such as family reunification; housing options with varying levels of services, such as transitional living programs, host homes, rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing; and, other affordable, safe, and stable living situations. Youth have the right to refuse housing and/or services. Coordinated entry processes, housing options, and services are trauma-informed, age and developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, provide fair and equitable access, reflect a positive youth development framework, and support the capacity of youth to achieve four core outcomes: stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and well-being.

**4. The community acts with urgency to swiftly assist youth to move into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with appropriate services and supports.**

Using Housing First and low-barrier approaches that ensure youth safety (as defined by each youth), the community efficiently connects youth experiencing homelessness to permanent or non-time-limited housing

and services opportunities to prevent future entries into homelessness. Time-limited housing and services programs also support youth to achieve safe and appropriate exits upon discharge. Youth may choose to first enter time-limited safe and stable housing options, such as transitional living programs, before securing a permanent or non-time-limited housing opportunity. This includes youth in unsafe situations, such as those fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, or trafficking, or those with other significant risk factors or vulnerabilities. It is the expectation that these programs, like all programs, demonstrate strong outcomes related to exits to permanent housing.

#### **5. The community has resources, plans, and system capacity in place to continue to prevent and quickly end future experiences of homelessness among youth.**

The community dedicates sufficient resources to continue to prevent and end youth homelessness scaled to projected needs, and acts with urgency to end youth homelessness. The community has comprehensive plans and partnerships in place and system capacity to continue to: 1) whenever possible, prevent or divert youth from experiencing homelessness through substantial partnership with schools (including post-secondary educational institutions), the child welfare and justice systems, employment, physical and mental health, and other youth-serving programs; 2) connect youth experiencing homelessness to appropriate and choice-driven crisis housing and services options; 3) connect pregnant and parenting youth to Head Start and child care centers; and 4) swiftly move youth into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with the appropriate services and supports.

### **Benchmarks**

Communities should use a variety of information and data to assess whether they have achieved an end to youth homelessness, including the data necessary to calculate the following benchmarks, which, like the criteria, will continue to be refined over time. [These tools and guidance can help with that assessment](#). Taken together, that information and data indicate how well a community's coordinated response is working to ensure that homelessness among unaccompanied youth is rare, brief, and non-recurring. Communities will also have the opportunity to document any special circumstances in their local context that should be considered during the review process.

These benchmarks provide important indicators of whether and how effectively a community's response to youth homelessness is working, but this is not the only data or information we will review as part of the federal confirmation process. Meeting the benchmarks does not guarantee that a community will be confirmed as achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness if other supplemental data or information related to the criteria above indicates that the goal has not yet been met.

#### **A. There are few youth experiencing homelessness at any given time.**

1. The community's census of youth experiencing homelessness includes all unaccompanied youth under 25 identified by local education agencies or other agencies that meet any federal definition of homelessness.
2. No unaccompanied youth under 18 are experiencing unsheltered homelessness.
3. No unaccompanied youth ages 18-24 are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, with the rare exception of someone who has been identified and offered low-barrier crisis housing and services, but who has not yet accepted assistance. The community continues to outreach to youth

experiencing unsheltered homelessness that have not yet accepted crisis housing and services, and continues to offer assistance at least once per week.

4. No unaccompanied youth seeking basic center services or emergency shelter are turned away unless they can be successfully diverted to another safe, temporary living environment of their choosing.
5. All youth identified as experiencing homelessness, including those who are sheltered or doubled up, are offered connections to appropriate housing or services.

**NOTE:**

- Federal partners are also considering an indicator that expresses the maximum number of unaccompanied youth ages 18-24 who may be identified as experiencing homelessness in a community at any point in time.

**B. Youth experiencing homelessness are swiftly connected to safe and stable housing opportunities and to permanent housing options.**

Federal partners are in the process of developing relevant indicators for this benchmark, focused on assuring rapid exits from homelessness to permanent housing, while also recognizing that some youth may choose to enter time-limited safe and stable housing programs or access other residential placements prior to accessing a permanent housing opportunity. Based on input to date from stakeholders and key partners, we are considering indicators that express the following:

1. For youth under 18:
  - a. The length of time in shelter before reunification or placement into permanent housing, transitional housing, or other safe and stable housing.
2. For youth ages 18-24:
  - a. The length of time in shelter before placement into permanent housing or transitional housing.

**NOTE:**

- Federal partners are also considering how to incorporate expectations regarding exits from transitional housing and transitional living programs within this benchmark.