Ending Youth Homelessness: Our Progress, Essential Strategies, and the Work Ahead

Our Progress

There has been an unprecedented increase in collaboration both among federal agencies and between the government and locally-driven efforts to end homelessness among unaccompanied youth under age 25. While we lack a comprehensive and confident national estimate of the scale and scope of youth homelessness, which makes it difficult to measure progress, communities are strengthening annual Point-in-Time (PIT) counts and other data collection efforts, and partnering with non-profit providers, schools, and researchers to improve our data and enhance our information. To expand our understanding of the most effective interventions, we are partnering with communities on the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program and the Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness grants, as well as supporting the urgent action of communities pursuing aggressive 100-Day Challenge goals and other efforts. All of these activities are helping us to better understand the full range of solutions, collaborations, and investments needed to achieve and sustain an end to homelessness, by any federal definition, for all youth.

Essential Strategies

To ensure that youth homelessness is prevented whenever possible, and that unaccompanied youth who do experience homelessness are on a quick path to safe, stable, and permanent housing, communities need to implement a robust, coordinated response focused on the shared outcomes of: stable housing; permanent connections; education/employment; and social and emotional well-being. Communities are using the vision described in Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness: A Coordinated Community Response to guide that work, focused on:

- Preventing youth from becoming homeless by identifying and working with families who are at risk of fracturing.

- Effectively identifying and engaging youth at risk for, or actually experiencing, homelessness and connecting them with trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and developmentally and age-appropriate interventions.

- Intervening early when youth do become homeless and working toward family reunification, when safe and appropriate.

- Developing coordinated entry systems to identify youth for appropriate types of assistance and to prioritize resources for the most vulnerable youth.

- Ensuring access to safe shelter and emergency services when needed.

- Ensuring that assessments respond to the unique needs and circumstances of youth and emphasize strong connections to, and supported exits, from mainstream systems when needed.

- Creating individualized services and housing options tailored to the needs of each youth, and including measurable outcomes across key indicators of performance, including education and employment.

The Work Ahead

We have much more work to do to end youth homelessness in this country. From the 2016 PIT count, we know that approximately 35,000 unaccompanied children and youth under age 25 were counted as living on the streets, in shelter, or in transitional housing on a given night in 2016. And more than 95,000 unaccompanied youth enrolled in public school districts were identified as experiencing homelessness at some point over the course of the 2014-2015 school year, including, among others, youth who are doubled-up or "couch surfing." To address this pressing challenge, we must focus even more effort on several important priorities:

- **Increasing the range and supply of housing options.** We must continue to target and prioritize existing affordable housing to people exiting homelessness, while also increasing the total supply of housing options, including units that are affordable for young adults 18-24 years old. Jurisdictions need to remove local barriers to housing development that have reduced the ability of many housing markets to respond to growing demand. And local, state, and national partners must identify ways to invest in new affordable housing.

- **Continuing to strengthen our data collection and analysis**. We must conduct the strongest possible youth count during each annual PIT count, with 2017 to be used as the baseline point-in-time estimate against which we will measure national and local progress on ending youth homelessness. At the same time, we need to continue to strengthen and analyze the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program data collected by local school districts, and other data on youth housing and service needs, to have the most accurate projection of the array of interventions and resources we will need to end youth homelessness.

- **Continuing to innovate around and expand the range of housing and services interventions necessary.** This includes interventions that can address and reduce family conflict and ensure youth remain connected to, or reunify with, their families, when safe and appropriate. We must also explore how evidence-based and promising practices in interventions like family reunification, host homes, transitional housing, supportive housing, rapid re-housing, and other non-time-limited options can be tailored at the local level to meet the varied needs and choices of young people in every community.

- **Enhancing connections to education and employment services and opportunities.** To prevent homelessness, and to ensure the success and stability of youth who have exited homelessness, we must better integrate education and employment services and opportunities into our housing and services interventions. These strategies must support pathways out of homelessness and increase educational and career opportunities that lead to self-sufficiency. We must also build capacity across local educational agencies to ensure every student experiencing homelessness is identified and has a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school.

- **Strengthening our ability to provide opportunities for all youth experiencing housing crises.** Applying the principles of Housing First and positive youth development, we must continue to build our capacity to provide all youth — including parenting youth, youth in rural areas, youth who have experienced trafficking, youth with disabilities, youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth — with fair and equitable access to the competent and empowering assistance of their choice.

- **Enhancing partnerships at all levels of government.** We must continue to pursue a collaborative approach across federal, state, and local government, including strengthening transition and discharge planning from child welfare and justice systems to prevent youth from ever experiencing homelessness.

- **Building a lasting response that will sustain our success.** Finally, we must sustain our investments into the best practices, strategies, and programs that are driving progress toward ending youth homelessness, knowing that our communities must have a lasting response to crises that can and do occur every day.

Together, we can drive our progress even further. We can end youth homelessness.