

THIS is Housing First for Youth

A Program Model Guide →

PART 1

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Housing First
4 Youth



This is Housing First for Youth - Part 1 – Program Model Guide

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Housing First 4 Youth



CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

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Hosted by York University and co-led by the COH, A Way Home Canada and our Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab, the TCE provides an opportunity to work internationally to contribute to the transformation of how we respond to and prevent youth homelessness.

Forward to the Revised Framework

In recent years, policy-makers and service providers have expressed concerns about how Housing First can be applied to the population of young people who experience homelessness. In response, [A Safe and Decent Place to Live](#) was developed through extensive community consultation and released in 2014 to provide a workable framework for Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). The development of this framework was the result of a collaboration between the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network) and two bodies that work with young people who are homeless: The Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton) and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. Young people with lived experience of homelessness were an important part of this process, and provided necessary and valuable input.

Much has changed since the report was released in 2014. Communities in Canada and around the world (including the U.S. and several countries in Europe) have implemented HF4Y programs consistent with guidelines outlined in this framework.

A downside to the growing interest in HF4Y is that organizations and communities are using the term “HF4Y” without adhering to the core principles of the framework. We have encountered several examples of organizations using the mainstream Housing First approach, which is intended for adults, with young people, without adapting the framework to meet their unique needs and life circumstances. We have created this program model guide to assist organizations who are interested in implementing HF4Y in their community. This model is based on our research in youth homelessness and promising examples of program adaptations in jurisdictions from around the world.

To support these efforts, we engaged in an extensive consultation process in Canada (led by [A Way Home Canada](#) in collaboration with the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness), the U.S. (involving the National Network for Youth, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and a large number of communities), and in Europe (involving FEANTSA and FEANTSA Youth, Focus Ireland, Rock Trust (Scotland) and others). We also consulted experts including Dr. Sam Tsemberis and Wally Czech. Their considerable insights and expertise have contributed to this enhanced and updated version of the HF4Y framework, which was released as [THIS is Housing First for Youth](#) in 2017.

WHAT'S NEW?

This new version of *THIS is Housing First* has been broken into two sections. Part 1 provides an overview of the research, principles, and philosophy underpinning the HF4Y model. It concludes with a series of case examples of successful local adaptations of the model in communities from around the world. The key takeaway from part one is that HF4Y builds on many of the best practices of Housing First, but has been designed to support the distinct needs of adolescents transitioning into adulthood. The services that must accompany dedicated housing encompass a broader range of areas of wellbeing.

Part 2 of this guide takes the form of an operations manual, providing practical guidance for how to implement HF4Y. It touches upon a number of areas, including case management, supervision, community planning, and designing youth-focused service supports. It is intended for service providers and community planners who may be interested in the operational aspects of HF4Y.

As has been the case with previous versions of this guide, it is a working document that will continue to be refined as new research and practice-related knowledge emerges.

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What is Housing First for Youth?

How is HF4Y distinct from the traditional Housing First approach?

HF4Y is an adaptation of the well-established Housing First approach used to address homelessness. Housing First programs – including the Pathways model and the At Home/Chez Soi project – have shown great success in addressing the needs of adults who experience homelessness, particularly for chronically homeless individuals with significant mental health and addictions issues.



HF4Y is an adaptation of the adult Housing First model, but it is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adults, and therefore the solutions must be youth-focused. HF4Y is grounded in the belief that all young people have a right to housing and that those who have experienced homelessness will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.




“The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed. This is as true for homeless people, and those with mental health and addiction issues, as it is for anyone. Housing is not contingent upon readiness, or on ‘compliance’ (for instance, sobriety). Rather, it is a rights-based intervention rooted in the philosophy that all people deserve housing and that adequate housing is a precondition for recovery” (Gaetz, 2013:12).

“Housing First is an effective, evidence-based approach to ending youth homelessness. This model advances our understanding of how we can tailor Housing First to the unique needs of young people so that we can end youth homelessness once and for all.”

Jasmine Hayes, Deputy Director
of the US Interagency Council on
Homelessness



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WHAT HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH IS NOT.

It is important to clarify how HF4Y differs from other housing-led approaches. The key thing to consider is that any program that claims to be HF4Y must align and demonstrate fidelity with the core principles of the model (discussed in the next section). Providing housing and/or supports for young people does not in and of itself make a program HF4Y.

Of course, there are a broad range of housing-led programs that may be beneficial for clients under the age of 25 or specifically targeted at youth. However, not all of these interventions are consistent with the HF4Y model. This may include programs that provide temporary or interim housing, including transitional housing, supportive housing and supported lodgings, or agency-specific housing that require young people to move out once they have completed the program or have reached a specific age. These programs often require participants to comply with a series of conditions, which may include time limits on how long young people can access services, a failure to separate housing from other supports, and the withdrawal of housing once a young person exits the program. To be clear, none of these conditions are consistent with the HF4Y core principles.

Housing First programs that are designed for adults that also include young people under the age of 25 cannot be considered HF4Y because they do not meet the needs of developing adolescents and young people. Even though HF4Y is an adaptation of the Pathways model, there are clear distinctions between the two in terms of core principles, program goals and outcomes, and case management.

Why is this approach to Housing First for Youth the right one?

There is compelling evidence that the experience of youth homelessness is often negative, unhealthy, unsafe, traumatizing, and stressful. An effective response must therefore focus first on preventing homelessness from occurring. And if it does occur, young people should be given immediate access to supports to help them exit as quickly as possible. Failing to act early and quickly can have devastating effects on young peoples' well-being and personal development.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS BECOME MORE ACUTE ONCE ON THE STREETS

Many young people wind up homeless because of traumatizing childhood experiences associated with violence and abuse. Once on the streets, the exposure to crime, violence, and exploitation can contribute to worsening mental health and dependence on substances as

a coping mechanism. In other words, the experience of trauma can be considered both as a cause and a consequence of homelessness (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Young people with lived experience of homelessness are three times as likely to be categorized as being in the “high” level mental health risk group. For instance, the [Without a Home](#) (2016) study found that 85.4% of youth surveyed fell in the “high” symptom/distress category, meaning that they required either inpatient or outpatient psychiatric care (depending on their level of housing stability). Forty-two percent of participants reported at least one suicide attempt, and 35% reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization.

ONCE ON THE STREETS, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE VULNERABLE TO CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

When young people are homeless, they can become targets for exploitation by employers, landlords, and others (Gaetz, 2002). This can include recruiting young people into dangerous and demeaning sexual activities. For instance, a 10-city study by Covenant House International found that one in five youth in Canada and the United States were trafficked largely for sexual purposes (Murphy, 2016).

REMAINING IN SCHOOL IS CHALLENGING ONCE YOU BECOME HOMELESS

It is well understood in Canada that education is important. Completing high school can increase one’s labour market participation. Due to improvements in the education system and a changing job market, less than 9% of Canadians fail to complete high school, and many go on to university or college. For homeless youth, however, the drop-out rate is much higher at 53%, while 51% are not currently involved in either education, employment, or training (Gaetz et al., 2016). Disengagement from school can affect a young person’s overall health and well-being, and increase the likelihood that they will have interactions with the justice system.

FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE, THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS IS LENGTHY

Many young people who experience homelessness are able to exit the situation and not to return to it again. Others – particularly those with adverse childhood experiences and a history of housing instability – may become mired in homelessness with negative and long-lasting consequences that persist into adulthood. The [Without a Home](#) (2016) study found that 22% of the sample (n=1139) were episodically homeless (repeated episodes over a three-year period), and 21% were chronically homeless (continuously homeless for a year or more).

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXIT HOMELESSNESS WITHOUT APPROPRIATE AND NECESSARY SUPPORTS ARE NOT DOING WELL

Housing First is one of the few homelessness interventions for which there is an established evidence base that justifies calling it a best practice. Its effectiveness with adult populations has been substantiated. However, the results are less certain when it comes to young people (Kozloff et al., 2016). Young people need more than a roof over their head to succeed in life. Yet, in North America *the* key indicator of community success when it comes to addressing homelessness is measured in terms of the number of people housed. Research demonstrates that without accompanying social and emotional supports, many young people who exit homelessness do not fare well (Gaetz et al., 2019). This is because “access to housing is not on its own a positive indicator of well-being, recovery, safety, healthy living, labour force participation, nor social inclusion” (Gaetz et al., 2019). At the same time, the trauma associated with homelessness can undermine a young person’s long-term housing stability and/or wellness. That is all to say housing alone will not appropriately address underlying issues such as addictions, extreme poverty, and mental health (Gaetz, et al., 2019, Mayock & Parker, 2017, Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Karabanow et al., 2016; Kidd et al., 2016; Mayock & Corr, 2013). Without proper supports, the homeless youth of today may become the chronically homeless youth of tomorrow (Baker-Collins, 2016).



The Core Principles of HF4Y

- 1. A Right to Housing with No Preconditions
↓
- 2. Youth Choice, Youth Voice, and Self-determination
↓
- 3. Positive Youth Development and Wellness orientation
↓
- 4. Individualized, Client-driven Supports with no Time Limits
↓
- 5. Social Inclusion and Community Integration

Core principles are important because they provide a guide for planning and delivering a strategy, service, or intervention. Core principles also become a standard against which program fidelity can be assessed. The HF4Y model is designed to address questions of safety and appropriateness of services and supports based on a young person's age and level of cognitive, social, and physical development. These services should be delivered in a manner that supports youth choice and reflects the diversity of the population being served.

The core principles of HF4Y are designed to meet the distinct needs of developing adolescents and young adults. This is based on an understanding that youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, both in terms of its causes and conditions, as well as the solutions. The model and corresponding principles are embedded in a human rights perspective that embraces positive youth development.

1. A right to housing with no preconditions

Youth homelessness exists because of the denial of the basic human rights of young people. HF4Y involves providing young people with assistance to obtain safe, secure, and permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible. Practically, this means that policies, laws, and strategies aimed at youth homelessness must recognize international human rights obligations¹, and be grounded in a human rights framework that informs all stages of development, implementation, and evaluation.

For youth, housing must be safe, affordable, and appropriate, according to the needs and abilities of developing adolescents and young adults. The location of housing should not impede young people from accessing the services, supports, and resources they need.

NO PRECONDITIONS

The key to the Housing First philosophy is that individuals and families are not required to first demonstrate that they are “ready” for housing. At the same time, housing is not conditional on sobriety or abstinence. For young people with addictions, a recovery orientation also means providing a harm reduction environment. Harm reduction aims to reduce the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community, and society as a whole, without requiring abstinence. However, as part of the spectrum of choices that underlies both Housing First and harm reduction, people may desire and choose “abstinence only” housing.

This approach runs in contrast to what has been the orthodoxy of “treatment first” approaches where people experiencing homelessness are placed in emergency services and must address certain personal issues (e.g., addictions and mental health) prior to being deemed “ready” for housing (having received access to health care or treatment).

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

HOUSING AND SUPPORTS ARE SEPARATED

Immediate access to safe, affordable, and appropriate housing and supports without preconditions is particularly crucial for young people in order to divert them from long stays in emergency shelters. The separation of housing from supports means that young people are not required to accept supports or to participate in programming (e.g., attending school) as a condition of obtaining or retaining their housing. This also means that when support ends, young people do not have to leave their accommodation. It is permanent for as long as they choose to live there. In a scattered-site housing context, supports are portable. If someone loses their housing or tenancy, they are not discharged from the program. The offer of support is tied to the individual, not their housing, and young people should be assisted in finding new housing.

The separation of housing and supports also refers to situations in which services, particularly mental health and clinical services, are not located in the housing or living environment of the individual.²

HF4Y providers adopt a “zero discharge into homelessness” perspective and practice, which means a young person’s behaviours and actions should not lead to a permanent loss of housing. If the youth loses their housing and is required to access a shelter, the caseworker must actively engage the young person in finding alternative housing. The important point is that in a HF4Y model caseworkers strive to do whatever it takes to address the behavioural issues that lead to eviction or a loss of housing. These events should be treated as “learning opportunities,” and every effort should be made to help the young person find a more appropriate housing option.

A right to housing with no preconditions means that housing and supports are separated. In other words, access to housing cannot be defined by conditions such as participation in programming where non-compliance leads to a loss of, or a denial of, access to housing.

2. In some contexts (such as in Canada) the range of housing options open to young people may include different models of housing that come with some conditions. These can only be considered part of a HF4Y program if the young person: a) has real options and makes an informed decision to participate in the program, b) remains a client of HF4Y while in the program, and c) has a clear pathway to permanent housing if the young person exits or graduates from the program.

2. Youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination

As a rights-based, client-centred approach, HF4Y emphasizes youth choice regarding housing and supports. Choices are best made when young people have been provided with enough information to make an informed decision on the appropriate options available to them. In supporting youth choice, one also needs to consider age and cognitive functioning (e.g., FASD, developmental delays, and/or brain injury) and how this may impact decision-making. Complexities may constrain choices available to youth, which is acceptable as long as the available options provide youth with the opportunity to choose their preferred course of action.

“Youth voice” means that the ideas, opinions, and knowledge of young people must be respected and contribute to all aspects of the program. In other words, young people should be actively involved in the design and evaluation of local HF4Y programs and have the opportunity to provide ongoing and regular feedback on the supports they are receiving and what program improvements can be made. Youth voice can be supported through a variety of activities, such as satisfaction surveys, youth advisory councils, or youth presence at staff meetings and board meetings.

The concept of self-determination acknowledges that young people should be in control of their own lives and be encouraged to make decisions and learn from them. For some youth, this will be difficult and uncomfortable, as they have had little opportunity to make their own decisions. In these situations, choices can be presented and explored with the youth, while still allowing them to choose the direction.

Youth choice does not mean “Do whatever you want.” Instead, it means “Here are the options available that fit within the criteria of HF4Y, the pros and cons of each, what is recommended given your circumstances, etc. What do you think you would like to do and how can we help you get there?”

LIMITS OF CHOICE

When we use the language of “choice,” we understand that no individual has free and complete choice to do whatever they want; this would not be true for anyone in society. It is important to explain this and provide examples to young people so they are not misled in what is meant by choice. Young people should be supported in making choices in order to be able to learn from their mistakes.

Participation in a HF4Y program does come with two conditions:

1. Young people must agree to a weekly visit or contact with a caseworker.
2. If young people have an income source, they are expected to contribute up to 30% to the cost of rent.

Young people in the early stages of adolescence or who may be living with cognitive impairments (e.g., brain injury, developmental delays, and/or FASD), may find it difficult to make decisions on their own. In these cases, options and choices may need to be negotiated to guide young people to make decisions that are feasible and reasonable, both short- and long-term.





3. Positive youth development and wellness orientation

Within the established Housing First model, practice is not simply focused on meeting basic client needs but on supporting recovery. This is central to the Pathways model and [At Home/ Chez Soi](#). For youth, a recovery orientation is not only embedded in an understanding of child and youth development but must also account for the fact that many young people who wind up homeless have experienced trauma. Research consistently shows that a majority of street affected youth come from homes where there were high levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, interpersonal violence and assault, parental neglect, and exposure to domestic violence, etc. (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Rew et al., 2001; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Moreover, once on the streets, young people are often exposed to high levels of violence (Gaetz et al., 2010) and sexual exploitation. Such traumatic experiences can impair cognitive development, decision-making, and undermine the ability of young people to form attachments.

A recovery orientation focuses on individual wellness, which includes providing housing and minimal supports to build assets, confidence, health, and resilience of young people. This can be achieved by ensuring young people have opportunities to participate in a range of recreational, educational, occupational, and vocational activities. Some organizations deliver these supports through existing programs and services, while others rely on community partners to deliver these services in the areas ranging from education/employment, healthy sexuality, counselling, medical, and mental health.

The HF4Y model employs a “positive youth development” orientation, a strengths-based approach that focuses not just on risk and vulnerability but also youth’s assets. A positive youth development approach:

- Identifies the youth’s personal strengths in order to build self-esteem and a positive sense of self
- Works to improve the youth’s communication and problem-solving skills
- Enhances and builds natural supports, including family relationships
- Assists the youth in personal goal setting
- Helps the youth to access educational opportunities and identify personal interests.

Adopting a positive youth development approach has important implications for practice. The program model and case management supports must incorporate an understanding of

the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs of developing adolescents. It must build on the strengths, talents, and dreams of young people and work towards enhancing protective factors and resilience. Importantly, a positive youth development orientation means that young people may need to be supported for a number of years. The HF4Y program asserts that young people cannot be rushed to assume the responsibilities of an independent adult. Instead, supports should be made available for as long as it takes for the young person to develop the skills, confidence, and financial stability necessary to achieve independence.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Because many young people are exposed to traumatic events (e.g., physical, mental, emotional abuse, etc.) either prior to becoming homeless or once they are on the streets (e.g., exploitation and criminal victimization), a HF4Y program and organization must adopt a culture of trauma-informed care. The experience of trauma can impact cognitive development, decision-making, how people respond to stress, the regulation of aggression and anger, as well as motivation. A trauma-informed approach means that everything the HF4Y program or system does is based on an acknowledgement of the existence of trauma, and that recovery and support must be part of how we work with young people.

Trauma-informed care involves the implementation of principles, policies, and procedures to increase safety and prevent re-traumatization in the context of service access, but does not necessarily address experiences of trauma directly through treatment intervention (Kirst et al. 2017; Elliott et al. 2005; Fallot and Harris 2005). For example, organizations can apply a trauma-informed care approach by training staff on trauma and involving clients in decision-making with regards to treatment, services, and supports they identify in order to create a collaborative and safe environment for recovery. If one of our key goals for young people is wellness, then HF4Y supports must attend to helping young people recover through identifying the source of trauma, developing strategies for regulating emotions and controlling stress and anxiety, and helping young people feel they have control of their lives. Addressing trauma can take time, and in many cases, must precede active and ongoing participation in other program goals and activities such as education, employment, and social development.

The focus of HF4Y, then, is not merely a successful transition to independent living, but on supporting a healthy transition to adulthood. This means supports must also focus deeply on enhancing physical and emotional wellness and addressing personal safety.

Accommodation and supports must be designed and implemented in recognition of the developmental needs and challenges of youth, as well as foster and enable a transition to adulthood and wellness based on a positive strengths-based approach.

4. Individualized and client-driven supports with no time limits

A client-driven approach recognizes that young people are unique and so are their needs. Once housed, some young people will need few, if any, supports, while others will need supports for the rest of their lives. This could range from Intensive Case Management to Assertive Community Treatment, depending on the needs of the population being served and the resources available to the organization. Young people should be provided with “a range of treatment and support services that are voluntary, individualized, culturally-appropriate, portable, and on-going (e.g., in mental health, substance use, physical health, employment, education)” (Goering et al., 2012:12). Supports may address housing stability, mental and physical health needs, education, financial literacy, labour market attachment, and life skills.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT COERCION

It is important to remember that the central philosophy of Housing First is that people have access to the supports they need, as they choose. Acknowledging young people have choice does not mean that case management supports must be avoided. The notion of active engagement without coercion is an “assertive, though very importantly not aggressive way of working with Housing First users” (Pleace, 2016:34). In practice, this may look like:

- **Supports are flexible in terms of time frames.** Providing supports for one, two, or in more rare cases, up to three years, may be required, especially for young people under 18 and/or those who have experienced trauma or who have more complicated developmental, mental health, and disability challenges.
- **The needs of young people will evolve over time, so the nature and range of supports must be adaptable.** Individualized plans of care will need to take account of developmental changes, capabilities and capacities, maturity and level of independence, and they should be updated regularly in consultation with young people.
- **What the worker thinks and the young person needs or wants are not always the same thing.** Caseworkers should use Motivational Interviewing techniques and the Stages of Change model when working with young people to explore key life domains and set goals.

- **It may take a long time to build a trusting relationship with a young person, but very little will be accomplished without it.** This can take on a variety of forms, such as sitting with a young person or listening to them talk about their life. These investments of time will not only build trust but also create a sense of safety for them to think about what they want to achieve in their life.
- **Young people should be encouraged to focus on positive change and be given opportunities to learn from their mistakes.** Providing them with a clear understanding that making mistakes are a part of all our lives and the consequence is not discharge from the program.
- **Use a harm reduction approach when dealing with substance use and addictions.** This includes having honest and frank conversations about the possible affects that substances may have on one's life.
- **Young people experiencing trauma or challenging conditions may find it difficult to engage with programming and/or supports.** Caseworkers must be patient, supportive, and relentless in their pursuit to help young people. In these moments, case management activities are even more important, as every interaction with a young person is a new opportunity to build important life skills and help them along their journey to well-being.

5. Social inclusion and community integration

Many young people who are homeless or unstably housed experience social exclusion – a term that describes the circumstances and experiences of persons who are shut out, fully or partially, from many of the social, economic, political, and cultural institutions and practices of society. If youth are housed and become or remain socially isolated, the stability of their housing may be compromised.

The HF4Y model is intended to promote social inclusion by helping young people build upon their strengths, skills, and relationships to enable them to fully integrate in their community and engage with school and the labour market. This means creating supportive opportunities for social engagement that are designed to help young people explore hobbies, personal interests, and participate in other meaningful activities. Within a HF4Y context, this can be particularly difficult and challenging work.

Key areas include:

- **Housing models that do not stigmatize or isolate youth:** The housing needs of young people will evolve over time. Those who work with youth experiencing homelessness regularly remark that loneliness and isolation – particularly for younger teens – are constant concerns that can affect successful reintegration in their community.
- **Opportunities for social, cultural, and spiritual engagement:** These are intended to develop positive social relationships and enhance social inclusion, particularly for Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2S, newcomer youth, and other communities and identity groups that may experience enhanced social isolation or exclusion.
- **Proactively seeking out natural supports:** From intake through to program delivery, caseworkers should proactively help youth identify their support network, including any relationships they wish to build or repair with family members, however defined.³ This is an ongoing process that needs to be directed by the goals and desires of the young person. Though many young people leave home because of family conflict, their family and community supports will continue to be important as they progress into adolescence and adulthood. Emphasis should be placed on helping young people repair relationships and establish comfortable boundaries with family members in order to build a network of support they can rely on throughout their life.

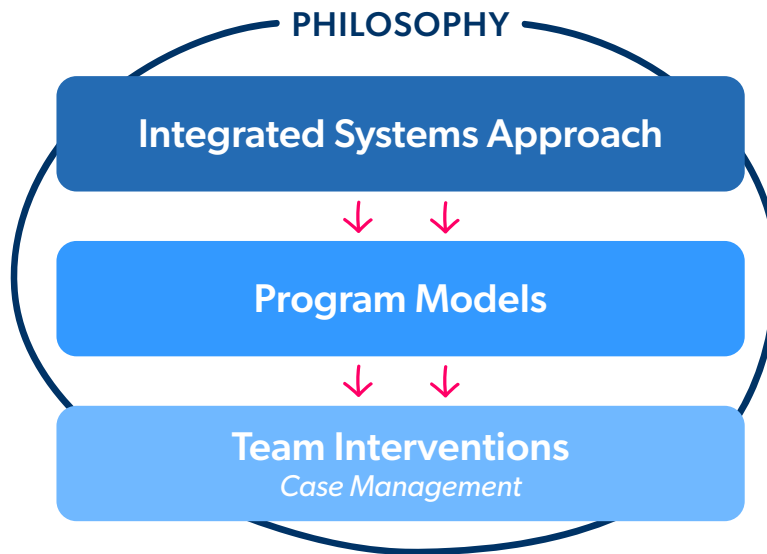
3. We say this acknowledging that there is no single type of family structure, and that even those young people who have left home because of adverse childhood experiences may have strong and healthy relations with some family members.

- **Opportunities for engagement in meaningful activities** through education, employment, vocational, spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities.
- **Connections to relevant professional supports:** At intake, asking youth about their professional supports (e.g., doctor, dentist, therapist, social worker, etc.) they have in place or have a desire to be (re)connected to is important. When family and other natural supports are strained or non-existent, many young people will benefit from a positive relationship with a professional, one that will remain a support beyond their time in the program, and someone who may be able to act as bridge to strengthen familial relations at some point in the future.

A Philosophy and a Program Model

HF4Y is both a program and philosophy that can be used to guide local system planning decisions, as well as service delivery.

Figure 1: A Philosophy and a Program Model



1. HF4Y as a philosophy – guiding community planning and implementation

As a philosophy, the core principles of HF4Y can provide a community or an organization with a foundational set of values to guide goals, outcomes, collaboration, and practice. In guiding community planning, it means that as a whole, the local system is designed around the core principles of HF4Y. All services should contribute either to the prevention of youth homelessness or ensuring that young people have immediate access to housing and supports so that their experience of homelessness is brief and non-recurring.

To be clear, this does not mean that all crisis services and housing options/models are representative of the HF4Y framework. Rather, they exist within and support a broader systems strategy that follows the core principles. Examples of this include:

- Rapid Rehousing programs where the basic principles of HF4Y may apply, but the supports are lighter touch and time delimited. For instance, in situations where critical time intervention (CTI) is used as the case management model.
- Models of permanent housing that come with conditions such as abstinence and/or mandatory participation in school or employment.

The point is, and this is worth stressing, that different models of accommodation and support can be part of the community strategy and can support the Housing First agenda without actually being considered HF4Y. Similarly, while mainstream services such as schools and health clinics support the work of HF4Y, they are not Housing First programs themselves. What connects them is integration into a service model that is guided by HF4Y principles. However, if a community only offers such programs and does not have any HF4Y programs that follow this program model guide, it cannot make the claim that it is a HF4Y community.

It is important to note that in some contexts young people have a right to housing (this is particularly the case in some European countries), but this right may come with conditions that conflict with the core principles of HF4Y (e.g., the need to separate housing from supports). In these cases, the youth homelessness/housing system is more properly described as “housing led” rather than “housing first.”

HF4Y AND SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

In contexts where the core principles of HF4Y guide local planning, it is important that an integrated systems approach be used. This means that within a “system of care,” all services and program elements within the youth housing/homelessness sector work towards supporting young people to access housing (or avoid homelessness) and get the supports they need. This includes not only dedicated HF4Y programs with a mandate to provide the intervention, but also allied services including outreach, emergency shelters, and other youth-serving organizations.

Importantly, a systems planning perspective requires engagement with public and private systems outside of the homelessness sector. The Systems Planning Collective describes systems planning as the “analysis, planning, and design of an integrated system and defined

service-delivery components that work together towards a common end, in this case to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness. It requires identifying the basic components of a system and understanding how these relate to one another. Alignment across the system is integral to ensure the components of the system work together for maximum impact.”⁴ The core principles of HF4Y can also guide the work of systems planning by focusing on the needs of young people at risk of or who experience homelessness.

“What one needs to establish is a ‘Housing First Friendly’ system of care.”

Wally Czech, Director of Training,
Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness

An integrated systems approach must also move beyond the homelessness sector and address mainstream systems and services that may contribute to youth homelessness, such as education, corrections, and the child welfare system. For instance, the 2016 [Without a Home](#) study found that while only 0.3% of Canadian youth have had involvement with child protection, 58% of youth currently experiencing homelessness have had such experiences, with 47% having been in in foster care and/or group homes (Gaetz et al. 2016; Nichols et al., 2017). Given this disproportionate experience of involvement in care it is imperative that those services work with youth homelessness service providers to ensure a smooth and sustainable transition to housing with appropriate supports. Young people should never be discharged into homelessness, whether they leave care of their own volition or “age out” of the system.

Additional considerations from the systems level must be given to funding and policy alignment with HF4Y core principles. Barriers to successful implementation can arise if the broader systems that provide funding and policy directions do not align with the core principles of HF4Y. Efforts to align these resources and interests with HF4Y philosophy should not be understated. The goal is to transform the cross-system and sector response to youth homelessness by foregrounding the importance of prevention.

4. The Systems Planning Collective is a collaboration between A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, and Helpseeker. To find out more about how to do this work and to access training modules, go to: <https://www.homelesshub.ca/SPC/systems-planning-collective-learning-modules>

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

One of the key organizational strategies that can advance HF4Y systems planning is Collective Impact. For years, there have been calls within and across various sectors to end their siloed approaches to addressing wicked policy and social problems. Efforts to collaborate, however, have often fallen short of creating the necessary fundamental shifts in thinking to generate social and systems change around an issue. Collective Impact calls on the various players and interests that touch on a carefully-defined issue to work together to develop and implement a plan that will fundamentally change outcomes for a population.

Numerous resources exist on how to take a Collective Impact approach, and A Way Home Canada's [Youth Homelessness Community Planning Toolkit](#) provides detailed guidance about how to use the Collective Impact model to address youth homelessness.

2. Program models

Housing First is considered a program when it is operationalized as a service delivery model or set of activities provided by an organization. In other words, the program closely follows the core principles of HF4Y, and the service delivery model seeks to address the broader range of support needs intended not only to facilitate independence but a successful transition to adulthood. While HF4Y programs must demonstrate fidelity to the model, values, and core principles as described, it can and should be adapted to take account of the local context, including the range of existing services and supports.

As a word of caution, as HF4Y grows in popularity, there may be pressures at the community or organizational level to implement the model in ways that are not consistent with the core principles defined above. Funding pressures and/or a lack of understanding about the distinct needs of adolescents and young adults can lead to problems, such as caseloads being too high or the organization not embracing harm reduction. These pressures can result in watered-down versions of the Housing First model, with reduced case management support and the inability to meet the individual needs of each youth. It will also result in program models that look similar to the adult model, with stricter time limits and a more limited range of supports applied in the adult setting. In such cases, these programs would not be considered HF4Y programs but rather, Housing First programs that accept youth. The danger is that the research on the effectiveness of the traditional model of Housing First, when applied to young people under 25, does not identify strong outcomes (Kozloff, 2016).



“The organization that is providing the Housing First program must have their policies and values aligned with the core principles. I have seen programs that struggle because their umbrella organization does not fully support all of the core principles.”
– Wally Czech, Director of Training, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness



3. Adaptations

Housing First, as a program model, typically targets chronically homeless persons who have complex mental health and addictions issues. The basic idea is that some form of prioritization is necessary, following the principle that with limited resources, those in greatest need get served first.

As a human rights-based approach, the HF4Y philosophy and guiding principles should be applied to all youth who are at risk of or who experience homelessness. In other words, the philosophy and core principles of HF4Y should inform community strategies to address youth homelessness so that all young people receive the supports they need. Evidence shows that when young people become and remain homeless for any length of time, the risk of exploitation and criminal victimization, coupled with the rigours of life on the streets, can result in compromised health, declining mental health, increased substance use and addictions, and entrenchment on the streets (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz et al., 2016). The HF4Y model must also be considered as a preventive measure for young people who are currently housed and yet are highly vulnerable.

Within a community strategy, population-based priorities should be set, where the most vulnerable homeless youth must always be a priority. As previously mentioned, communities may adapt the HF4Y model in order to target and meet the needs of specific sub-populations or to implement it in a preventive context. Examples of these adaptations include:



→ **HF4Y adapted for Indigenous youth.** Home Fire in Calgary, Alberta was the first HF4Y program designed for Indigenous youth in Canada. It has since been joined by Endaayaang (“Our Home” in Ojibway), a HF4Y program in Hamilton, Ontario operated by the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre and part of the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab. Such adaptations of HF4Y must be Indigenous-led and involve a hybrid model combining the HF4Y framework and core principles with Indigenous ways of knowing and support models that emphasize cultural engagement and reconnection.

“So many of our Indigenous young people have been impacted by various systems creating self-doubt, low self-esteem, insecurity, and a sense of worthlessness. Making the Shift has enabled us to focus on these areas to create a sense of community and an understanding of Indigenous Culture, identity, and empowerment to know and feel they are not what the systems have dictated them to be”. – Sheryl Green, coordinator Endaayaang

→ **HF4Y targeting young people involved with Child Protection Services.** HF4Y can be adapted to support young people who are transitioning from care, even if they are not homeless. The model can also be implemented as an early intervention (i.e., prevention) program. The First Place for Youth in Oakland, California, for example, was an early adopter of HF4Y for youth leaving care. This model inspired Lethbridge, Alberta to implement a similar approach to supporting young people. The HF4Y project in Waterford, Ireland adapted the Canadian HF4Y model to support young people who leave care. More recently, Free 2 Be Housing First for Youth Leaving Care was established by WoodGreen Community Services in Toronto, Ontario as part of the Making the Shift project. This program focuses on prevention by targeting youth who are transitioning from child protection services. Project leader Eric Wexler suggests:



“The lens on homelessness prevention within Free 2 Be is also unique, as most youth either in or from care are not street homeless, but housed in temporary, inadequate, or precarious shelter with friends, relatives, or the family members of intimate partners. Unfortunately, we have seen that these options are often accompanied by emotional and physical abuses akin to those our participants experienced in childhood or new forms of abuse and instability as a result of domestic violence, sex trade work, human trafficking, and/or the need to rotate through their housing options for a variety of interpersonal or systemic reasons.”

([Homeless Hub Blog](#), September 11, 2019)

- **HF4Y for youth leaving corrections.** There is a body of research that suggests that when young people are discharged from prison into homelessness the risk of reoffending goes up. HF4Y can be adapted as an important transitional support for young people leaving either the adult correctional system or the youth criminal justice system.

Though the model can be adapted to accommodate the needs of specific sub-populations, organizations must uphold the core principles and values of HF4Y to maintain fidelity.



4. Putting it all together

The purpose of the distinctions between HF4Y as a philosophy, systems approach, and program is to bring forward a clearer understanding of what HF4Y is and *is not*. Ideally, all levels of practice and system design should align to support and put the core principles into practice because greater fidelity to the model can indicate what works well in practice and where changes may need to be made.

Until the model gains a stronger foothold in policy and practice within all orders of government and at the community level, there may be some inconsistency in how these core principles are upheld and applied. For example, a community can do systems and planning work in partnership with the education and health systems using the HF4Y model without having any formal HF4Y programs, as long as the core principles are guiding and integrated into the community's system of youth homelessness services and interventions. While not individually being Housing First programs, a range of housing options and service providers that work with youth (e.g., schools, hospitals, corrections, etc.) are each different parts of a larger system that can work according to the goals of a complete HF4Y program.

Incorporating the values and principles of HF4Y in community planning will no doubt result in fewer occurrences of youth homelessness in Canada.

Models of Accommodation

Transitioning from adolescence into adulthood can be challenging but is made even more complicated when exiting homelessness. There are a range of additional adult-related stresses and pressures that these young people face, such as paying bills, balancing household budgets, and/or childcare. At the same time, they are discovering who they are and what they want from life – the kind of self-discovery that is associated with the developmental stages of early adulthood. Whereas young people are typically able to take risks to navigate these underdeveloped aspects of their life, youth exiting homelessness are not afforded the same freedoms because the consequences may lead to a return to homelessness (Karabanow et al., 2016).

Therefore, models of accommodation that are designed for adults, but used to support young people without adaption or consideration of the needs of young people, cannot be considered as HF4Y programs simply by virtue of offering housing and supports. This is because they are not consistent with the HF4Y core principles and do not take into consideration the stages of adolescent development of program participants. Similarly, these services far too often overemphasize “independence” at the expense of providing the necessary supports to assist young people in successfully transitioning to adulthood (Gaetz, 2014). Housing alone will not facilitate this transition. Instead, “[i]t means having the income to support oneself (and the necessary education to

“Back then I might have thought it was a great idea, like ‘fantastic, yay, I get my own place,’ but since then I’ve been through it all now I can see that I wouldn’t have been able to be what I am today if I was like ‘Here you go, you’ve got your own place.’ [In transitional housing] I learned how to budget money and figure myself out and got help with my own mental health and drug addictions. If I was just given a place, it might have been just like couch surfing in my own place, do my own drugs there. Now I don’t do drugs and I can cook for myself – not that I couldn’t before, but I can cook a lot better, and I know a lot about nutrition.”

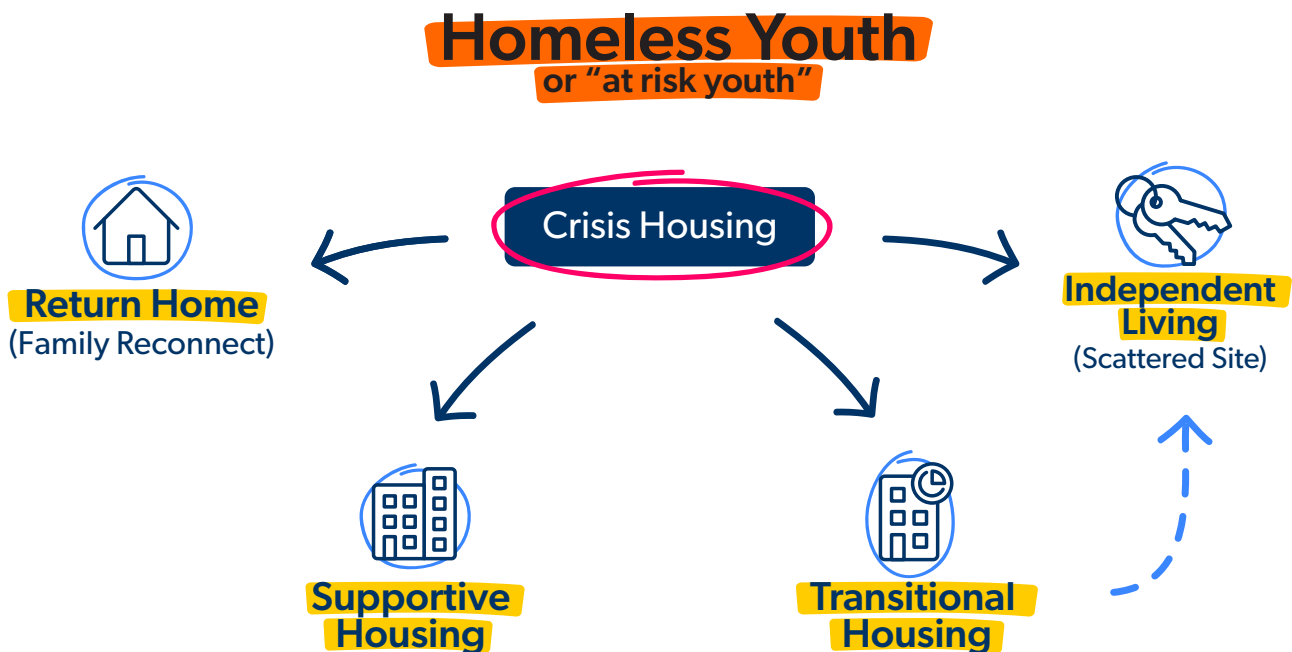
– Alex, age 19, Hamilton, ON

sustain that) and the ability and maturity to make good decisions, to develop and sustain positive relationships and to have a meaningful life” (Gaetz, 2014:78).




The housing needs of young people will change over time, depending on their stage of development, life skills, and income. Therefore, the supports and housing options offered to young people must be tailored to these unique circumstances. This may include independent scattered-site housing found on the private rental market. In other cases, young people may prefer to live in transitional housing or a congregate living arrangement, which includes renting a room in a house or building where amenities are accessed communally and where services and supports are typically offered on site. Transitional housing may be a viable option for young people who are not yet comfortable living independently.

The following diagram illustrates the range of housing options that may be available for young people⁵ in their community and can be adapted to meet the principles of HF4Y.

Figure 2: Range of Accommodation Options for HF4Y Programs



5. It should be noted that many communities are unable to offer the full range (or even a subset) of the housing options presented here.



Models of accommodation that are designed for adults, but used to support young people without adaption or consideration of the needs of young people, cannot be considered as HF4Y programs simply by virtue of offering housing and supports. This is because they are not consistent with the HF4Y core principles and do not take into consideration the stages of adolescent development of program participants. Similarly, these services far too often overemphasize “independence” at the expense of providing the necessary supports to assist young people in successfully transitioning to adulthood (Gaetz, 2014).

HF4Y Range of Supports

A. IN-PLACE CRISIS HOUSING

Sometimes referred to as “respite accommodation,” in-place crisis housing is short-term accommodation for young people designed to divert them away from emergency shelters into healthier, more positive environments while long-term housing is arranged. Host Homes programs provide a safe room for young people to stay in their community with an approved volunteer and receive case management support as an alternative to emergency shelters (which may not exist locally). Young people and their families may simply need a break to cool off and sort things out through time-limited critical case management, or the home environment may be unsafe for the youth to return and other housing options need to be explored. Host Homes programs may act as an intermediary between returning home and other housing options but are distinct from emergency shelters. If possible, emergency shelters should be the very last resort to housing young people due to the risks of exposure to trauma and exploitation in drug and sex trafficking.

B. RETURNING HOME

An ideal outcome of HF4Y for many young people is that they return home to live with a caring adult. This can be achieved through interventions and services that enhance and strengthen *family and natural supports (FNS)* such as family reconnection, mediation, and strengthening relationships with natural supports. The FNS approach acknowledges “family” (however defined by a young person) as an asset that should be strengthened through intentional case management activities that broaden a young person’s network of support. These supports should also include counselling to address underlying family trauma, which can contribute to housing instability. One model used by the U.S. Family and Youth Services Bureau is In-Home Family Stabilization. The model focuses on working with family members to identify and address the sources of conflict to prevent youth from leaving the home. The [Family and Natural Supports Program Framework](#) published by A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, as part of the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab, is another resource organizations and communities can draw upon for guidance and advice. Careful planning and investigation must be carried out prior to a young person returning home. This is to ensure that they return to a positive and safe environment. In truth, though, moving back home may not be an option for some young people. In these cases, alternative living arrangements must be found.

C. SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

“Supportive Housing” encompasses a number of possible program models that can range from short- to long-term or permanent options. Some key examples include:

- Supported Lodgings Schemes (UK): Schemes are a variation on Host Homes/Respite Accommodations that temporarily serve youth that are unable to return home. Operated by local councils, voluntary organizations or charities in the UK, Supported Lodgings connect young people aged 16 to 21 (sometimes up to 24 years old) to local hosts that are willing to rent out a spare room in their home and provide food, basic life skills training, and support. Often, youth are able to access Supported Lodgings within a day, and the length of stay can range from a few days or weeks to a couple of years.
- Long-term/Permanent Supportive Housing: Youth whose physical health and mental health needs are acute and chronic may require Permanent Supportive Housing. Permanent supportive housing options may be appropriate for extreme cases for youth with serious disabilities or high complexities. This is a more integrated model of housing and services for youth with complex and concurrent issues where the clinical services and landlord role are often performed by the same organization.

D. TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

There is a broad range of transitional housing models for youth. The Foyer is an established transitional housing model, particularly in the UK and other European countries, and has been adapted and transformed in Australia (Meneses-Echavez, 2018; Gaetz & Scott, 2012). There is also a strong evidence base for its effectiveness as an [age appropriate housing and supports intervention](#) (Gaetz & Scott, 2012) with a Canadian [example in Calgary](#) (Haven’s Way – Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary) that demonstrates fidelity to the model (Turner, 2016).

The actual living arrangements within a transitional housing model can vary. Two stage models provide an interesting approach, whereby in the first stage, young people live in congregate settings where they may share living space (separate bedrooms but shared cooking and living spaces). In the second stage, young people may move into separate bachelor apartments within the same facility. This allows for more independence and life-skills learning but in a more structured environment than scattered site models.

Denmark also offers a form of transitional housing that allocates a certain number of rooms within university/college dorms to youth that have experienced homelessness to provide them with a positive peer environment that can eventually lead to independent living.

Finally, the inclusion of transitional housing within this program model comes with two caveats. First, there is limited evidence that suggests time-limited transitional housing results in positive outcomes for young people. This may be in part because young people are forced to leave before they are ready. Second, young people who choose such accommodations should also be able to access supports when they feel ready to move into independent living. This can be achieved through housing supports that help young people locate safe and appropriate housing. It can also be achieved through “lease conversion,” whereby after a time, young people who are living in apartments have the leases transferred over to them. In this way, they can achieve independence without having to move. In cases where young people do have to move – or choose to – they should retain case management/housing supports in their new home until they feel comfortable living independently.

E. INDEPENDENT LIVING IN SCATTERED-SITE HOUSING

This is the model of accommodation that most closely fits with mainstream approaches to Housing First and should be the end goal for any individual in a HF4Y program because youth are more successful once they are housed in a permanent way. Independent living refers to situations where young people obtain and maintain their own or shared permanent housing in either the private market or the social housing sector. Depending on the needs and desires of the young person, they will also have access to a range of services and supports that are not time-limited nor should they be tied to housing. Some youth will need assistance locating, securing, and maintaining housing. Other young people may need ongoing supports for a much longer period of time. The success of the Infinity Project in Calgary attests to the viability of this model for many young people.

Moving into independent accommodation can present opportunities and challenges for young people. Karabanow (2013) has suggested that in order to “leave the streets,” spatial separation of housing from both street youth services and from those spaces that street youth occupy may be important. This transition may be accompanied by feelings of loss, guilt, loneliness, and isolation. Learning how to manage having friends over in ways that do not jeopardize their tenancy can be a challenge for young people who are used to the companionship of friends.



A key barrier to successful implementation of Housing First is the lack of affordable housing, which is particularly acute in some markets. While this presents challenges to housing anyone who is homeless, the problems can be compounded for youth. Unemployment rates tend to be much higher for youth, and those that are able to gain employment typically wind up with low wage, part-time jobs, which makes maintaining housing over the long run difficult. In tight markets, young people may also face age discrimination.



Within a HF4Y context, what kinds of housing are appropriate?

A core principle of HF4Y is Youth Choice, Youth Voice, and Self-Determination. Young people should have a say as to what kind of housing they receive and where it is located. Housing First programs typically prioritize independent living through the use of scattered-site housing, which in North America involves renting units in independent private rental markets but may also include social housing. Most certainly within a HF4Y program, independent living is a desired outcome for all young people and is the preferred option for young people who are homeless. However, the developmental needs of young people and local rental laws must also be taken into consideration. For example, some jurisdictions do not allow landlords to rent to minors. It is for these reasons that communities must strive to offer a range of housing options that are suitable for young people.

In other contexts where housing options and systems of supports are less developed, such as Canada, young people may be referred to other kinds of housing options (e.g., transitional housing) *while remaining within a HF4Y program*, as long as the following conditions are met:

- The young person has real options and makes an informed decision to participate in the alternative housing program;
- They remain part of the Housing First program on the caseload of a HF4Y worker, even while residing in a housing program that comes with supports and potentially conditions (this is with the understanding and consent of the young person);
- They are provided with support for accessing other kinds of housing – and in particular, independent living – when they leave the program. In other words, they cannot lose their housing and supports when their tenure in the housing program ends;
- There is a clear pathway for HF4Y clients to eventually move into and sustain independent living accommodations.

As is the case with any Housing First context, choice is primary, which means there must be options that are age and developmentally appropriate. The housing needs of young people should be regularly reassessed to reflect their changing life circumstances, goals, and aspirations.

“

“Young people must be given the opportunity to change their mind and try something different if their original choice is not working for them.”

– Wally Czech, Director of Training, CAEH



The Range of Supports

Without providing young people with a broader range of supports and resources that are both comprehensive and developmentally appropriate, we risk condemning young people to a life of extreme poverty, social exclusion, and potentially a return to homelessness. In other words, if young people do not get the support they need at this critical moment in their lives, they may be placed in a situation where they experience chronic homelessness as an adult.

The HF4Y model offers a much broader range of supports than is typically associated with the adult-focused Housing First model. This is because the model is designed to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults, namely to facilitate a successful transition to independence, and to achieve levels of self-sufficiency that are associated with adulthood. Moreover, the HF4Y approach emphasizes the degree to which we must focus on the well-being of young people as a means of enhancing housing stabilization.

The recovery from homelessness also occurs in a context where young people are also in a state of transition to adulthood. Supports, then, must not only focus on the fact that young people have experienced or are at risk of homelessness, but that they are adolescents or young adults. The model of supports should be based on the needs of young people. The range of supports that should be made on offer are outlined in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 - Model of Supports within a HF4Y Program





1. Housing supports

Some young people are able to exit homelessness by finding housing on their own. For others, however, there is a need for more intensive case management (ICM) and housing support. In some HF4Y programs, this support is carried out by a dedicated “housing worker” “or “liaison” who works closely with the case manager. More typically, though, a caseworker oversees these tasks in collaboration with the young person who is accessing services, which is an important way to build necessary life skills. Typical housing supports include:

1. **Finding and securing housing:** work with young people to find and secure safe, affordable, and appropriate housing in both the private rental market or through public housing (where available).
2. **Retaining housing:** teach young people how to take care of and maintain housing, pay rent on time, develop good relations with landlords and neighbours, as well as how to host guests.
3. **Providing rental supplements:** offer income supports and a rental supplement that is available as long as the young person is in the program or until they have secured enough income to support themselves and their needs. Rental supplements should be structured to ensure that no more than 30% of a young person’s income goes towards rent.
4. **Covering basic startup needs:** help young people access the basic necessities required to live independently, including furniture, hygiene products, and appliances. Involve them in this process by visiting furniture banks, browsing online selling forums, or where resources exist, take them shopping.
5. **Preventing a return to homelessness:** rehouse (as quickly as possible) young people who are evicted, released from prison, or discharged from hospital to avoid a situation in which they become homeless (see Section 4 for eviction prevention strategies).



2. Supports for health and well-being

A recovery orientation should inform the clinical model used in a HF4Y program. These supports should be designed to enhance well-being, mitigate the negative effects of mental health and addictions, improve quality of life, and foster self-sufficiency. Key areas of clinical support include:

1. **Access to health care:** Obtaining access to good primary care is important for a population that may not have had that in the past, particularly for individuals with ongoing health challenges and disabilities. Access to diagnostic testing is also important, as many individuals may have disabilities or conditions for which they can receive additional supports. Securing a family doctor or access to a medical clinic that can support and serve the young person beyond their time in the program is essential.
2. **Mental health supports:** A large percentage of young people who experience homelessness also endure considerable mental health challenges (Gaetz et al., 2016). As part of a “system of care,” such individuals should be supported in accessing assessments for mental health issues or learning disabilities, as well as in finding suitable interventions if required.
3. **Trauma-informed care:** Because many people who become homeless often have experienced trauma either prior to becoming homeless or once they are on the streets, it is essential that those providing supports practice trauma-informed care. This approach acknowledges that experiences of trauma can be paralyzing and compromise one’s ability to make sound judgements and decisions.
4. **Harm reduction:** Harm reduction is a humane, client-centred, and evidence-based approach to working with people with addictions. These supports should help young people retain their housing, reduce the risk of harm to themselves, people close to them, and the community, as well as help them become more engaged with education, training, employment, and other meaningful activities. Programs must not impose “abstinence only” requirements on young people who seek housing or related supports.

5. **Personal safety:** Wellness-based supports are intended to protect young people and build resilience to avoid exploitation. Many experience physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse prior to being homeless. Once on the streets, they are exponentially more likely to be victims of crime (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Two recent studies of youth homelessness in ten cities identified that almost one fifth were victims of human trafficking (mostly sex trafficking) (Murphy, 2017). When young people leave the streets, they often continue to be victims of criminal exploitation, including home takeovers.
6. **Food security:** For young people growing up, a good diet is important for proper emotional growth and physical development. The best way to guarantee food security is to ensure young people have an adequate source of income and to direct them to community programs that can provide food security as a safety net should they need.
7. **Promoting healthy sexuality:** It is important that services are sensitive to the diverse sexuality of youth including gender-appropriate services. In practice, this means going beyond providing contraceptives and access to STI testing. It means having conversations with the young person about healthy sexuality, their own boundaries, celebrating and respecting gender diversity, and referring to appropriate services and supports for all youth, including those who identify as LGBTQ2S+. This work is particularly important because many young people have been exposed to physical and sexual abuse at a young age.



3. Access to income and education

Inadequate income and employment are well-established risk factors contributing to people cycling in and out of homelessness. In the *Without a Home* study (Gaetz, et al. 2016), 53% of the participants had dropped out of high school (compared to the national average of 9%), and 50% were unemployed or not participating in education or training. Supporting young people to earn an income and obtain an education is key to addressing housing stability in the long term.

- **Educational engagement and achievement:** Many of those who experience homelessness have not completed high school, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage in the labour market. As such, for those who are interested, there should be supports for (re) engagement with school.
- **Employment training:** Some individuals who are homeless have limited employment experience and can benefit from training that will support them to get the kinds of jobs they desire.
- **Income and employment:** Many youth do not require support in the form of education and training – they just need access to employment. On the other hand, some young people will require income supports due to illness, injury, or other physical and emotional barriers that impair their ability to work in the short, medium, or long term.



4. Complementary supports that are mobile

These are supports designed to facilitate housing stabilization and to help youth and their families improve their quality of life, integrate into the community, and potentially achieve self-sufficiency. Wherever possible, supports and resources including case management should be offered in a mobile format – meeting youth where they are at, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and developmentally.

1. **Life skills:** For those with little experience of independent living or stable housing, case managers should offer life skills training, mentoring, and individual support that focuses on the enhancement of self-care and life skills. These skills should be taught in a variety of formats including group class settings or one-on-one while out in the community.
2. **Advocacy:** Clients may face challenges in advocating for their own rights and access to services and supports because of language barriers, stigma, and/or discrimination. Individuals may also be reluctant to enter certain institutional settings, such as hospitals or mental health facilities, because of past experiences. In such cases, service providers and case workers should provide advice, support, advocacy, transportation, and accompaniment to assist young people.
3. **System navigation:** Navigating systems can be challenging and demoralizing. Case managers should work alongside young people to overcome systems barriers so that they can access the services and supports they need and are entitled to.
4. **Peer support:** Talking with someone who has also experienced homelessness is important for individuals who are marginalized or living with the effects of trauma. The At Home/Chez Soi project and other Housing First efforts have demonstrated that peer support can lead to enhanced housing stabilization (Barker and Maguire, 2017, Voronka, 2016, Linton & Shafer, 2013, Goering et al., 2012). To that end, peer support specialists should be incorporated in an organization's case management

approach. In practice, this means that non-peer support staff (those without lived experience) should be required to attend peer support training, while peer support specialists should regularly attend staff meetings, take part in standardized training, and (where possible) manage a caseload.

5. **Parenting support:** Some young people who are at risk of or experience homelessness are also parents. They may need support in developing parenting skills and/or enabling the return of their children if they have been removed from their care.
6. **Legal support:** The range of legal and justice issues that homeless youth face is varied and complex. Many will have interactions with the justice system and/or experience criminal victimization. However, the legal needs of young people may also involve advocating for children and youth rights, addressing age-based and other forms of discrimination, dealing with unpaid fines, accessing services, supports and benefits, and navigating legal processes, such as eviction. Additionally, many youth experience exploitation and challenges from employers, landlords, and the police, as well as problems relating to family law, and in some cases, immigration. Because of their age, many young people are often not aware of their rights nor of the processes required to protect them. Such legal issues can present real barriers for young people who are trying to move forward in their lives. As such, young people may need access to a range of supports including legal advice, consultation, and/or representation to address their legal needs.



5. Enhancing social inclusion

Personal well-being requires positive relationships with others, connections to community, and engagement with activities that one finds meaningful and fulfilling. The HF4Y model is designed to accommodate a range of supports that contribute to positive well-being in a variety of areas:

1. **Social relationships and connections:** Young people should be supported and provided with opportunities to develop and practice positive relationships with a variety of individuals, including peers, adults, employers, colleagues, and landlords. Empowering young people to introduce themselves to their neighbours or becoming involved in community activities, hobbies, or social activities are examples of how young people can grow their social networks.
2. **Family and natural supports:** Connection to a caring network of support, including family members, is essential for personal development and wellbeing. These are the individuals that young people will draw upon in times of difficulty or need. Enhancing family and natural supports can involve reconnection and reunification with family – however defined by the young person – or with other meaningful adults in ways that can contribute to longer-term housing stability, personal development, and growth. In the context of case management, this means inquiring about family and natural supports at intake. This information is useful for identifying the type of support a young person may need to enhance or redefine personal relationships or provide support to seek out new connections to strengthen their network of care.
3. **Community engagement and integration:** The opportunity to engage with communities of choice – whether that be people or institutions in the local neighbourhood or making cultural connections – is also important to well-being.

4. **Cultural (re)connection:** Many homeless Indigenous young people experience cultural disconnection. If desired, young people should be supported to engage with cultural and spiritual traditions that contribute to their growth. This is particularly important for Indigenous youth, who face multiple housing barriers attributable to the devastating effects of colonization and the intergenerational trauma caused by Canada's racist residential school system. The HF4Y program should therefore provide Indigenous young people with supports and access to enable reconnection to Indigenous knowledge, culture, elders, and ceremony.
5. **Meaningful activities:** In addition to education and employment opportunities, youth should be supported to explore interests and participate in meaningful activities, such as arts, sports, volunteering, cultural and religious activities, etc. When young people take part in such activities, they learn and develop new skills, nurture new relationships, and enhance their social skills.

CASE STUDIES

The following section presents several case studies of successful youth-focused housing programs in Canada and around the world.

→ Canada

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary (BGCC) is a local organization providing a range of services—including housing and supports—to adolescents and youth in Calgary, Alberta. The BGCC is part of the national Boys and Girls Clubs organization and shares its core values (including respect, belonging, and support). A system of care has been developed in the homelessness sector in Calgary, which has led to the BGCC developing and maintaining some crucial partnerships across the sector. The BGCC currently runs several HF4Y programs, two of which—the Infinity Project and Home Fire—are detailed here.

The Infinity Project

The BGCC introduced the Infinity Project, a HF4Y program for all young people on the homeless continuum in February 2009. **Infinity provides youth aged 16-24 with a permanent home in the community of their choice and the supports they need to become independent and self-sufficient.** Staff work with youth to help identify affordable and appropriate housing options, develop life skills (such as learning to budget, clean a home and interact with landlords), and prepare for independent adult living.

→ **Why HF4Y:**

Using the HF4Y philosophy allowed the BGCC to design programs that meet the needs of the general youth experiencing homelessness population, as well as the more specific sub-population of Indigenous youth.

In 2008, 20% of all homeless individuals in Calgary were youth; it became clear that youth-specific solutions were desperately needed and so the BGCC introduced the Infinity Project in February 2009. Infinity was the first HF4Y program that aligns with

CASE STUDIES

the model presented here and was instrumental in the development of the original HF4Y framework. A few years later, the BGCC introduced Home Fire, which is the first Indigenous-led HF4Y program. These programs greatly informed the development of this HF4Y program model guide as well.

→ Challenges:

- **Housing** – There are several challenges with housing in Calgary. First, there has been a lack of affordable, appropriate, and available housing for youth over the past few years; although the affordable housing situation is not as dire as in other communities in Canada, it is still an ongoing issue that makes it harder to house program participants. Another challenge is that landlords are often reluctant to rent to young people, especially those under the age of 18. This in turn makes it harder for youth to participate in their education or hold down a job to pay for their housing. Finally, there is a lack of housing options that come with intensive supports for youth with complex addictions or mental health concerns.
- **Social Inclusion and Community Integration** – Infinity and Home Fire both use scattered-site housing because it is what is locally available; however, this type of housing can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially in younger teens. Home Fire also has the added challenge of providing a cultural home for Indigenous youth in a scattered site model. Many Indigenous youth who join the program already feel disconnected from their culture and are reluctant to participate in cultural events, feelings that can be exacerbated by living in private units across the city.

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→ Service Delivery:

The system of care in Calgary has allowed the BGCC staff to access and refer young people to a range of services throughout the city. This collaborative approach has resulted in youth being able to access services through one organization instead of needing to go through multiple systems to access the various supports they need.

The Infinity Project focuses on all youth experiencing homelessness, while Home Fire is designed for an Indigenous focus; however, this does not mean that Indigenous youth are required to participate in the Home Fire program – youth are encouraged to choose which supports and programs they believe are the best fit for themselves. No matter what choices they make, youth in these programs are never discharged into homelessness; workers will continue to work with the youth until they find a solution that sticks.

Youth voice and choice are huge tenets of the BGCC service delivery model, which advocates for young people having the opportunity to be able to make mistakes and learn from them, to choose their own neighbourhoods, and to rely on themselves to make decisions for their future.

In terms of staffing, there is one manager of all youth housing projects, one program coordinator responsible for all operational aspects, and several housing support workers who are dedicated to helping youth find permanent housing; each worker is responsible for 7-8 youth, although ideally the ratio would be less than 1:7.

Case management is provided on an individual basis, as the needs of individual youth are unique. Some (generally younger) youth will require intensive case management and long-term support, while others may need little to no support once they have been housed. Staff work with the youth especially on building family and natural supports connections so that youth will not be left on their own when their time in the program ends.

CASE STUDIES

Making the Shift Demonstration Project: Endaayaang, Hamilton, ON

Endaayaang: Housing First for Indigenous Youth

Endaayaang, which is an Ojibwe word that means “a safe place where your heart/spirit feels at home,” is a HF4Y program in Hamilton, Ontario, whose focus is supporting Indigenous youth between the ages of 16–24 years who are exiting youth systems such as children services, justice, hospital systems, or leaving home for safety reasons. Endaayaang has built their foundation on the core principles of HF4Y and are using the Youth Assessment Prioritization (YAP) tool while also incorporating the Circle of Courage, the 7 Grandfather teachings, and the Medicine Wheel in their case management and program outcomes, giving space to allow youth to learn about their culture and heal from intergenerational trauma. With every step, Endaayaang looks at how culture is infused into the program design, beginning with grounding the project in spiritual ceremony to putting forth their intentions and commitment to the project, to the language they use in their case management and cultural teachings they provide to young people.

→ Service Delivery:

A key component of Endaayaang’s HF4Y program is offering a broad range of culturally-based housing options. The Hub acts as the central Indigenous community space, with offices for program staff and peer support workers and nine apartment units for youth with shared communal spaces. During evenings and weekends, Journey Coaches come to the Hub to provide cultural teachings to young people, foster a sense of community, and provide crisis support when regular program staff are unavailable. In addition to the supportive housing at the Hub, Endaayaang will have two homes based on the Foyer Model, housing three youth and a peer mentor that lives within each of the homes. The third housing option is scattered site, independent apartment units throughout the city of Hamilton.

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With the support of a Program Manager, three Endaayaang Navigators will be responsible for the intensive case management and guidance of 25 youth through their journey to adult self-sufficiency. In addition, Journey Coaches and Peer Support Mentors will assist the youth in building their social connections and provide them with opportunities to explore their community, all while connecting to culture.

→ **Challenges and solutions:**

The challenges and barriers Indigenous youth face are unique. These include family history, intergenerational trauma, and cultural and historical trauma. As many communities can relate, a lack of housing—affordable housing especially—and reputable landlords has also been a challenge. To address these challenges, the planners of Endaayaang spent time doing extensive research on the situation faced by Indigenous youth in Hamilton, connected with those in their community to gain interest and build trust, and helped promote an understanding of how HF4Y is an added resource to support the Hamilton community. The planning team held focus groups with youth, including youth with lived experience, to provide insights and guide the program's design. They also travelled to meet with folks in Alberta who were doing similar work and could provide teachings to foster their growth.

CASE STUDIES

→ Ireland⁶

Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland operates across the Republic of Ireland and provides a range of services to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Focus Ireland provides a HF4Y service in Waterford, a housing-led service linked closely to the core principles of HF4Y in Limerick, and have recently commenced a HF4Y service in Dublin.

→ Why HF4Y:

Focus Ireland provides aftercare services through short term residential programs and a support service in Waterford following successful models in Dublin. However, Focus Ireland noticed a large gap in services for young people in Waterford and noted that many young people with complex needs who did not qualify for after-care services or who had left an aftercare service were at a particular risk of becoming homeless.

These young people generally had negative experiences of services and are difficult to engage with. The lack of opportunity afforded to them to gain a period of stability meant that they struggle to develop positive aspects to their lives, such as education, employment, or a sense of community that resulted in the consumption of drugs, involvement in criminal behaviour, or the development of poor mental health. For these vulnerable youth, traditional homeless services were not yielding positive results.

A HF4Y project allows us to provide stability through its principles of build trusting relationships with hard to reach young people. The service does not provide perfect results and often young people have set-backs and make mistakes. However, in a HF4Y project we see these mistakes as learning opportunities for young people and support them through them.

6. The case studies of Ireland and Scotland were written by Robbie Stakelum of FEANTSA, and are reproduced with permission from the report, Stakelum, R. (2017) Council of Europe – Study Session Report: FEANTSA Youth - Housing solutions to youth homelessness based on a Human Rights Approach

CASE STUDIES

→ Challenges:

→ **Housing:** There are two main challenges to housing.

Access to housing in general in Ireland is at a crisis point. The economic circumstance of young people coupled with prejudice in a competitive market make access to private rented housing virtually impossible. Therefore, vulnerable young people are dependent on social housing. Within the Social Housing system waiting lists are extremely long and families get prioritized over single people, which makes it difficult for young people to access this alternative housing. Sourcing housing for HF4Y has thus proven difficult.

Flexible secure tenancy is needed to support young vulnerable adults who generally have changing needs. A balance needs to be struck between allowing young people flexibility to attain housing in pursuit of employment or education while also ensuring secure tenures.

→ **Social Inclusion and Community Integration:** The available housing for this HF4Y project are scattered across a city. A key challenge has been objections by neighbours to housing vulnerable youth. Tenants experience prejudice and blame for any anti-social behaviour that occurs in the area. These are vulnerable young people who make mistakes; if they engage in anti-social behaviours like a house party, the neighbours are not patient while the tenants learn to live in a community setting, often for the first time.

→ **Timeframes and Expectations:** HF4Y in this project has worked to keep vulnerable youth out of homelessness. But it takes time for the young people to trust the model. Service users and staff need to be patient to see changes in the client's lifestyle and making positive choices, for some behaviour can become more chaotic in the initial phases of the project.

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→ Service Delivery:

This HF4Y has been running in Waterford for one and a half years. The caseload for each staff member is generally 10-15 young people.

The HF4Y service in Waterford focuses on young people who have high support and often complex needs. This is a group of young people who have been failed by other social services. The service also targets young people who are exiting after-care programs with high needs. Both these groups are vulnerable young adults, where there are no other services available for them to access.

Harm reduction is an important cornerstone of the service. This is broader than interventions for substance misuse, but also includes reducing activities and behaviour which can lead to losing a tenancy. For example, encouraging the young person to have a friend or two over to visit them instead of inviting 20 or more people for a party.

HF4Y services have a rich partnership with the local municipalities, Child Protection system, and statutory health services. This includes co-locating some of their staff to better engage with young people.

The service in Waterford uses a rolling housing model, which is based on their needs at the time the young person presents to the service. This means that all programs have the option to be delivered without physically moving to a new house (e.g., transitional program may become long term housing). In some instances, the housing may change, and the young people may be required to move. In this instance supports will follow the young person, and if another long-term tenancy cannot be attained, then a short-term tenancy will be sought in the meantime.

The service provider, Focus Ireland, is an approved Housing Body sanctioned by the local municipality. This allows the organization to purchase property specifically for vulnerable youth. As the owner of the properties, the service provider also has the flexibility to move tenancies between their stock as needed by the young people.

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→ Scotland

Rock Trust

Rock Trust is an organization based in Scotland committed to ending youth homelessness. The range of services they offer include housing, education, and employment supports. Rock Trust have been involved in FEANTSA Youth Study sessions for 4 years. Their participation in the study sessions has helped facilitate a transition from the staircase model of service provision towards implementing HF4Y.

→ Why HF4Y:

In the Scottish context, Rock Trust noted that the staircase model worked for most young people, but not everyone. The Homelessness Scotland Act 2002 had created statutory duties to house. HF4Y provided a human rights-based approach to provide integrated services for vulnerable youth.

→ Challenges:

There were many obstacles to overcome in transitioning towards HF4Y.

- **Housing:** Rock Trust owned its own accommodation that was appropriate for the staircase model. The Rock Trust chose a scattered housing approach to HF4Y, to ensure the project met the principle on permanency of tenure. This meant establishing additional housing for the HF4Y pilot. A housing association approached the Trust to discuss how they could offer support. As well as offering accommodation for young people moving out of supported accommodation, they also offered nomination rights to flats for HF4Y, which meant that the young people could remain in the tenancy for as long as they wanted.



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- **Culture Changes:** With a history in delivering services in the staircase model, a shift to HF4Y requires a culture change. In all organizations, change can be seen as a threat. Moving to HF4Y does not mean that the staircase model is wrong and that staff haven't been providing a good service. The shift needs to be pitched as a means to build on progress and further improve services. Time also needs to be taken to advocate for HF4Y to senior management and the board of directors about why the transition is important. The arguments made to frontline staff and to a board of directors differs. It is important to think about how you advocate to different people at different levels. For Rock Trust, the argument to the Chief Executive was around delivering the best quality of services for young people, whereas for the Board of Directors it was about being the first organization to deliver it and making the organization more robust in the sector.
- **Funding:** An underlying principle of Housing First is continued support for as long as is needed. This is a principle that is difficult to put into practice due to funding restrictions. Rock Trust has acquired funding for the HF4Y program for two years. This creates issues around honesty and expectations with service users. Rock Trust has taken the decision to tell service users that they only have funding for this program for two years but continue to fight for additional resources to enjoy the long-term sustainability of the program.

→ **Service delivery:**

Generally, there are five young people for every 1.5 workers. In delivering HF4Y Rock Trust has prioritized young people exiting care. It is difficult to decide which young people to focus on; in their context Rock Trust chose the youth which "no one else will house."

Rock Trust has partnered with Almond Housing Association in providing housing units for their HF4Y service.



“The thing that really appealed to me was that I was going to be able to have a place to live in a nice area of Hamilton. My rent was subsidized, but it was a place of my own. I had a bed, I had my own room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Another thing that really appealed to me was that it was something that I could look forward to and try to excel at. I was so happy to be in this place! I sat down at my desk inside my room of this new place -- I hadn't really finished unpacking my stuff -- and I sat down and I just thought in my head, 'like, this is it... I'm done fighting, I'm done searching, this is a place that I can sleep at, a place that I can call my own.' I'd been searching for this for so long and this is finally happening, after years. This is what I have been fighting for tooth and nail, for however long.”

Conor, age 20, Hamilton, ON.



Conclusion

The growing interest in Housing First and the strong evidence base for its success has clearly raised questions about its applicability for youth. As a philosophy, HF4Y can be a guiding principle for an organization or community wanting to end youth homelessness. HF4Y is an important intervention because it prioritizes getting young people into housing as quickly as possible, with age appropriate supports to follow. It is founded on the belief that all people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing. Employing a positive youth development philosophy and orientation means drawing on the strengths, dreams, and talents of young people to support them on their path to adulthood. Finally, strategies to end youth homelessness that embrace Housing First must also work to increase the supply of affordable housing in the community but must also focus on ensuring that young people have the necessary income supports to obtain and maintain housing.

“For the first time in my life I am not living a program. I am living my life.”

Youth participant in the Infinity Project, quoted by Kim Ledene, Trellis.

For those who are interested in implementing a HF4Y program, consider these eight important takeaways as you embark on your journey to make prevention an integral part of your strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness:

1. HF4Y SUPPORTS MUST BE YOUTH-ORIENTED.

The focus of supports should be on assisting adolescents and young adults in their transition to adulthood, not merely to independence. This means not only providing support for obtaining and maintaining housing but also supports that enhance health and well-being. It means ensuring young people have access to income and if possible, re-engagement with education. Life skills development is also important for young people who will have little experience of living independently. Finally, young people need opportunities for meaningful engagement. A social inclusion approach includes not only support in building and strengthening social relationships and community connections but engaging in activities that bring meaning and a sense of well-being to young people.

2. HF4Y CAN BE ADAPTED AS A MODEL OF HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION.

As communities begin to recognize a need to focus on prevention alongside supports for exiting homelessness, there are opportunities to adapt the model to support prevention. HF4Y can become a way of supporting young people exiting corrections, aging out of child protection, or those who are discharged from inpatient care.

3. THERE IS A NEED FOR CULTURALLY SPECIFIC ADAPTATIONS FOR HF4Y.

An equity-based approach to HF4Y suggests that the model can and should be adapted to meet the needs of sub-populations, including LGBTQ2S youth and racialized minorities. In some countries, the experiences of newcomers (immigrants and refugees) must be accounted for in program design and service delivery not only because of cultural differences and the experience of racism and discrimination but also because laws (and rights) may be applied differently.

In Canada, Indigenous youth make up about 30% of the youth homelessness population. There is some emerging evidence that Indigenous-led approaches to HF4Y are effective in supporting young people, and helping them reconnect with their culture and communities. There is also much we can learn from Indigenous ways of knowing that can and should apply to supporting *all* youth in transitioning to adulthood in a safe and planned way.

4. HF4Y IS NOT THE ONLY SOLUTION TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS, BUT IT IS A KEY ONE.

HF4Y does not promise or pretend to be the only approach to addressing youth homelessness. However, it can and should become an important intervention that supports and in turn is supported by other preventive and early intervention strategies, short term emergency supports, etc. Under the broader umbrella of strategies to end youth homelessness, HF4Y has an important place.

HF4Y is more than a catch phrase, more than a brand, and much more than simply applying the adult model of Housing First with a different age mandate. Those communities that adopt a HF4Y approach must be able to demonstrate fidelity to the core principles as outlined here and work to provide the range of accommodation options and supports described above. This is important, because in a context where HF4Y becomes more popular with policy-makers and funders, there may be pressure or a temptation to simply describe existing program models as somehow being HF4Y. Not all housing program models for youth – no matter how good – fit this definition and should not be described as HF4Y. While important, housing alone will not end youth homelessness. Instead the focus should remain on improving overall outcomes for young people, which necessarily means attending to the emotional, physical, social, spiritual, and cultural needs to support a successful transition from adolescence into adulthood.

To learn more about how to get started implementing HF4Y within your community, download the operations manual that compliments this guide. It provides detailed guidance, advice, and suggestions on topics ranging from case management and supervision to data and systems integration.

Visit www.homelesshub.ca/HF4Y

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