

# HOUSING FIRST: IMPROVING ACCESS TO HOUSING FOR YOUTH SURVIVORS

Housing First is an effective, evidence-based approach to ending homelessness by providing housing immediately, without preconditions or barriers, such as sobriety, employment, or participation requirements. Additionally, supportive services are offered, but are not required. Support can range from rental assistance to case management. Each individual will vary in the support they need. Housing is the first step, not the solution to healing.

## WHAT DOES 'YOUTH' MEAN?

For the purposes of this document, “youth” is defined as **individuals between the age of 14-24 years**; the Runaway and Homeless Act defines youth as “not more than 21 years of age”, so please closely review age criteria as definitions may vary based on program, state, and funder. Please follow your local and agency guidance in working with minors and/or those under guardianship, including but not limited to mandated reporter responsibilities.

## HOUSING FIRST PRINCIPLES

Adapted from [This is Housing First for Youth](#)

### A right to housing with no preconditions

A right to housing with no preconditions means that housing and supportive services are separated. Access to housing is not defined by conditions such as participation in programming where non-compliance leads to a loss of or a denial of access to housing.

### Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination

Youth choice does not mean “Do whatever you want.” Instead, it means “Here are the options available that fit within the criteria of the housing selection, 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?” The concept of self-determination acknowledges that young people should be in control of their own lives, and be encouraged to make decisions and to learn from them.

## Positive youth development and wellness orientation

Positive Youth Development (PYD) focuses on meeting youth at their own developmental stage and supporting positive growth.

- A PYD orientation ensures that youth have opportunities to contribute within the community and develop transferable skills and competencies through interactions with adults and other youth.
- PYD is centered on strengths and personal goals, which guide youth to make healthy choices, build confidence, and maintain self-control. PYD orientation incorporates trauma-informed care, developmentally appropriate and strengths-based services into programmatic design and procedures
- Assessment tools, case management and data management supports must be strengths-based and support a voluntary services model. This provides youth the autonomy to have choice in the services that are best for them.

### SERVICE PROVIDER TIP

Weave enhancing and building natural supports, including family relationships, into service planning to ensure access to a range of supports that enable youth to nurture and maintain social, recreational, educational, occupational and vocational activities.

## Individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits

Due to the developmental needs specific to youth, it is incredibly important for programs to be able to offer an array of options reflective of the different levels of support youth themselves are requesting, including those that reflect Housing First principles. Since many youth-specific housing and shelter models have higher barriers to access than many adult-specific programs, the need to apply Housing First principles is all the more pressing. These barriers could translate into youth not being eligible for local housing options unless there is a housing first option available.

Services are offered based on the needs identified by the youth, not the case manager directing the services. For example, use the [Housing Assessment Tool](#) as a starting place to talk about what their housing values/priorities are and what supports they identify as necessary for their safety and stability.

### SERVICE PROVIDER TIP

When youth identify wanting their own housing, begin working to build the skills they'll need to help them maintain housing as opposed to waiting to start building skills once they are housed.

## Social inclusion and community integration

Programs should recognize and reflect the realities of society and life. Unrealistic expectations can set youth up for failure and have the potential to push youth out the door before they have a chance to build a trusting relationship with any staff in the program.

Programs focusing on the goals of the survivor and finding ways for youth to integrate into society are ways to incorporate a housing first approach for service providers.

### SERVICE PROVIDER TIP

Design intake paperwork to be as flexible and broad as possible. Flexibility will allow you to develop rapport and will make room for the relationship to grow. Expect and plan for changes as youth transition into housing. Housing is the first step, not the solution to healing.

## BENEFITS OF APPLYING HOUSING FIRST PRINCIPLES FOR YOUTH SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING

### Dovetails with best practices within the anti-trafficking field:

Housing instability can re-traumatize survivors and put them at greater risk of being re-trafficked. Since youth homelessness is, at times, a precursor to trafficking, it's all the more important to think through a range of approaches to support housing goals. Service providers practicing trauma-informed practices strive to provide low-barrier or no-barrier access to resources and allow survivors to choose what services they would like. As such, providing housing options that eliminate barriers to access and promote survivor autonomy is aligned with trauma-informed principles in service provision.

### Reduces problematic practices identified by youth and providers as creating barriers to housing:

By utilizing a Housing First approach, providers can remove or reduce the following preconditions that are often present within shelter and transitional housing models for youth relationship including:

- Requiring behavior health/substance use treatment up to zero-tolerance substance use policies
- Mandatory curfews and/or restrictions on coming and going including limiting/excluding guests
- Restricting external communication, including taking away cell phones
- Mandated participation in program activities
- Educational, vocational, employment requirements
- Hosting onsite meetings with law enforcement agencies

Source: [Homeless Youths' Perceptions of Services and Transitions to Stable Housing](#)

### Reduces eligibility requirements, thereby addressing common barriers for youth accessing housing:

By utilizing a Housing First approach, programs enable youth to access permanent housing without prerequisites or conditions **beyond those of a standard lease** and have increased flexibility in reviewing criminal backgrounds, credit history, and employment history—all areas that are complicated for survivors of trafficking.

## PRINCIPLES OF HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH

The principles of Housing First for adults and youth are the same, **but the specific and practical case management services differ for youth based on their age and development.** Youth entering housing first programs (regardless of model) are often engaging in independent living skill building, learning, and practicing for the very first time. Many, but not all youth, will have been living in a more structured environment (shelter, foster care, with a care giver) or a more unstructured environment (outside, couch surfing, their trafficking situation) and so the menu and intensity of services will need to be flexible to reflect the range of needs.

Using the principles of **Housing First for Youth** provides a framework from which to design your case management model to best support the needs of youth survivors.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR MINORS (YOUTH UNDER 18)

Several states have enacted legislation to allow unaccompanied homeless youth under 18 to obtain shelter and housing without parental consent. Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act regulations also allow youth to enter federally-funded programs without parental notification or consent if the provider determines contacting a parent or guardian is not in the youth's best interest, the provider is unable to locate a parent or guardian, or the youth refuses to disclose a parent's or guardian's contact information. Please follow your local and agency guidance in working with minors and/or those under guardianship.

Source: School House Connection, [State Laws for Minor Consent for Housing and Related Services](#)

### Additional Resources:

1) *Ending Youth Homelessness Promising Program Models*

<https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Ending-Youth-Homelessness-Promising-Program-Models.pdf>

2) *Rapid Re-Housing for Youth Toolkit*

<https://endhomelessness.org/resource/rapid-re-housing-for-youth-toolkit/>

3) *This is Housing First for Youth*

<https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COH-AWH-HF4Y.pdf>