

Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Technical Assistance Center



AN INTRODUCTION TO RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH FOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROFESSIONALS

By Darla Bardine, JD, and Andrew Palomo, National Network for Youth

BRIEF OVERVIEW

This brief aims to develop Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals' awareness and knowledge related to serving young people with disabilities who experience homelessness. It also provides guidance on building collaborative relationships with Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) service providers to assist youth with disabilities in accessing available services and support.

Consider how the contents of this brief are relevant to your current work by reflecting on the following questions:

- Have you served young people who were experiencing homelessness?
- Have you asked homeless young people about their needs?
- Are you willing to meet youth "where they are at"?
- Have you had young clients who have struggled with transportation and/or had difficulty being on-time for appointments?
- Have you had young clients who have not had parental support and/or vital government documents, such as a valid government identification, social security card, or birth certificate?
- Do you know who the local RHY service providers are? If so, do you have a relationship with at least one person on their staff?

INTRODUCTION

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) aims to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including individuals with developmental or intellectual disabilities. This legislation works to ensure that individuals with disabilities are integrated into the workforce and paid the same wage as their peers who do not have a disability (WIOA, 2014; The Arc, 2015).

One component of WIOA is to provide support and stability to out-of-school youth during the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood. For all youth, this time of transition can lead to instability if protective factors are not in place. For youth with disabilities, the transition can be especially difficult as few have a plan after leaving secondary education to enter the workforce or pursue post-secondary education (Prince, Hodge, Bridges, & Katsiyannis, 2018). WIOA (2014) ensures that Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies direct more resources to developing a stable transition period and preparing young people with disabilities to integrate into the workplace with competitive pay.

Individuals with disabilities, particularly youth with disabilities, experience higher rates of homelessness (Sullivan and Knutson, 2000). Moreover, individuals who experience homelessness during adolescence are more likely to have a disability in adulthood (Childress et al., 2015). Flaming & Burns (2015, p. 31) found that "...the combination of unaddressed problems and low levels of assistance appears to be associated with proliferation of disabilities."

Collaborative relationships between VR professionals and RHY service providers are necessary to address the instability that young people with disabilities face when they are homeless. As a starting point, VR

professionals can find a RHY provider near their service area using the online directory available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth>. Due to a high rate of youth with disabilities who experience homelessness (Sullivan and Knutson, 2000), VR professionals should focus on assisting these individuals in accessing employment opportunities. A job with competitive pay in an integrated workplace, one of WIOA's (2014) goals for individuals with disabilities, would also serve as a way to reduce the risk of youth experiencing homelessness.

OVERVIEW OF RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

RHY are defined by a complex and critical stage of personal growth. Young people experiencing homelessness lack safety, stability, and other basic life needs. Moreover, many of these individuals are unable to access systems, services, and resources designed to support healthy development (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010).

Demographics of RHY

Although the precise number of youth and young adults who experience homelessness is difficult to determine as a result of residential mobility, a recently federally-funded national estimate found that at least 700,000 youth (ages 13 to 17) and 3.5 million young adults (ages 18 to 25) had experienced homelessness within any 12-month period (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017). This study also found that both rural and urban areas had similar rates of youth homelessness (Morton et al., 2017). Some additional findings from this research include:

- Non-white, Hispanic youth are 33% more likely to face homelessness;
- African American youth are 83% more likely to face homelessness;

- An estimated 3.5 million young adults in the U.S.—1 in 10 young adults—ages 18-25 experienced a form of homelessness over any 12-month period;
- An estimated 700,000 youth in the U.S.—1 in 30 youth—ages 13-17 experienced a form of homelessness over any 12-month period.

Shared Youth Population—VR and RHY

There is some disagreement on the age range that allows an individual to qualify as a youth. For WIOA, youth is defined as ages 14 to 24. In contrast, current Runaway Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) law caps youth at age 21, though legislative efforts are under way to raise the age to 25 for all RHYA programs. Many RHY providers receive funding from other sources and are able to provide housing and services to youth up to the age of 24 or 25, depending on their alternative sources of funding. Age requirements vary among the three community-based programs funded under

RHY and the specific RHY program(s) available in the local community will determine which of the youth served by VR will be eligible to access these services.

Protective Factors & Strengths

Protective factors are those that tend to limit the effect of risks on youth experiencing homelessness. These factors contribute to increased resiliency which serves to deter youth from engaging in risky behavior and encourages well-being (Monn et al., 2013). Protective factors can take many different forms, but one of the most effective forms is having a stable and caring relationship with a parent or guardian, a mentor, or a group of peers (Monn et al., 2013).

Protective factors can also be attributes that youth have developed, such as problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, and a healthy mental state. These skills create a stronger foundation that decreases the likelihood an individual will engage in risky behavior (Monn et al., 2013).



Specific Age Range Requirements for Runaway & Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) Funded Community Programs

RHYA grants are administered by the Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). As a department at HHS, FYSB supports communities in preventing and effectively serving youth who run away and youth experiencing homelessness. Reaching out to a local RHYA provider(s) is a critical first step to learning more about the resources available to young people in the local community. Below is a summary of the programs the RHYA grants can provide.

1. **Street Outreach Programs** support work with homeless, runaway, and street youth to help them find stable housing and services: available to youth under the age of 22 (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018e);
2. **Basic Center Programs** provide crisis housing with services for a maximum stay of 21 days: available to youth under the age of 18, unless state law allows individuals who are 18 and 19 years old to be housed with minors (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018e);
3. **Transitional Living Programs** provide longer-term housing with services for a maximum stay of 635 days or longer if the youth has not yet turned 18 years of age: available to youth up to the age of 22 as long as 21 or younger when they enter the program (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018e).

For a State-by-State Program Guide: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/grants/fysb-grantees>

Risk Factors & Challenges

In contrast to protective factors, risk factors are those that exacerbate the challenges associated with homelessness and/or instability. These factors can include abuse, substance abuse, exploitation, mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression, and difficulty attending school. Exploitation, for example, can come in many forms such as survival sex or trafficking, with the former referring to the exchange of sex in order to receive food or shelter (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Difficulty attending school disrupts an individual's opportunity to be in a stable

learning environment (a protective factor). Furthermore, absence from school hinders an individual from forming relationships with peers, teachers, and mentors, which are other protective factors.

Adolescent & Young Adult Brain Development & Developmental Characteristics

Youth homelessness poses additional risks in relation to the development of the prefrontal cortex of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for decision-making and is not fully developed until the early to mid-20s (Kolb et al., 2012). This means that

when youth and young adults experience homelessness, they are more inclined to participate in risky behaviors—such as drug use or risky sexual behavior—that can lead to trauma and other health issues (Johnson, Blum & Giedd, 2009). However, during this developmental period, the brain’s elasticity also has a great ability to heal from trauma and establish new and healthy thought and behavior patterns (Moore, 2015).

Factors Associated with Youth Homelessness

Various factors in a young person’s life can contribute to becoming homeless, including the following:

- **Lack of a High School Diploma or GED:** Education is one of the strongest indicators of homelessness. Youth who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers (Morton et. al., 2017).
- **Economic Difficulties:** Youth with household incomes of less than \$24,000 are 162% more likely to report homelessness (Morton et al., 2017).
- **Pregnant and Parenting Youth:** Young parents are three times more likely to experience homelessness than their non-parent peers. This poses significant challenges for the children of these youth as well; housing instability during childhood can have lifelong consequences relating to the health, development, and security of these children. Moreover, there are limited resources that are available for unmarried, homeless, youth parents. It can be difficult for these young parents to provide care for their child(ren) while also finding stable housing (Dworsky, Morton, & Samuels, 2018).
- **Family Conflict:** Chapin Hall found that most youth identify the start of their housing instability with family conflict that resulted in the individual either fleeing or getting kicked out of their home. There are many different ways family conflict can manifest into youth homelessness. LGBTQ youth provide one example of this. LGBTQ youth are 120% more likely to report homelessness, although this is a conservative figure as many youth can be hesitant to identify themselves as such in a survey (Morton et al., 2018).
- **Entrance into Foster Care:** Although entrance into foster care is supposed to be a start towards stability, youth often regard foster care as the beginning of housing instability and later homelessness. Foster care results in family disruption and the inability for individuals to form healthy long-term relationships with siblings, parents, and guardians. This can translate into a lack of support in the future. Moreover, there are several youth who age out of foster care and become homeless as a result (Samuels, Cerven, Curry, Robinson, & Patel, 2018).



RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH SERVICES AND PROVIDERS

Continuum of Services

For the reasons highlighted throughout this brief, RHY require a combination of developmentally-appropriate housing and service options. At the systematic level, this approach depends on close collaboration between government agencies, service systems, and community-based organizations. In this way, communities are able to offer RHY a continuum of services. Offering a full range of developmentally-appropriate service and housing options for RHY empowers young people to lead fuller, healthier lives because they will spend less time worrying about basic needs and more time pursuing education and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Some of the services that many RHY may need to access, in addition to housing, include the following (National Network for Youth, 2016):

- **Case management:** Planning and goal setting exercises, care coordination, advocacy, and referrals to additional services;
- **Life skills building:** Self-care, financial and household management, goal-setting, and problem solving;
- **Workforce development:** Skills training, employment assistance, internships, career planning and professional preparation;
- **Education & technical training:** Support and re-engagement for students in middle and high school as well as those attending postsecondary institution, working towards a GED, or attending a technical program;
- **Nurturing permanent connections:** Reconnecting with family members,

establishing new connections with supportive adults (e.g. teachers, coaches, mentors).

- **Medical care:** Doctor appointments and checkups, substance abuse services, and other treatment;
- **Mental health care:** Individual and group counseling, suicide prevention, and emotional wellness;
- **Mentoring:** Ongoing guidance and support from peers or adults, with an emphasis on healthy, long-term relationships;
- **Family support services:** All-family counseling, parenting assistance, affordable and accessible child care for families;
- **Legal services:** Direct representation for civil and criminal matters, record expungement, and assistance obtaining an ID.

Outreach & Housing Programs

Public services available to RHY include the following types of outreach and housing programs:

Street Outreach: Street outreach is one way in which youth services and providers attempt to engage with homeless youth. Outreach teams go to locations that homeless youth tend to frequent such as parking lots, abandoned buildings, and parks. The teams receive this information from community members and attempt to form a relationship with homeless individuals to build trust.

In addition, outreach teams provide basic necessities such as food and water to the homeless individuals they locate in these areas (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018d).

Drop-In Centers: Drop-in centers are locations, typically near public transportation, that are informal and welcoming for homeless youth. These centers also provide necessities to individuals and are youth-focused, serving as an alternative to adult shelters (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016).

Short-Term Crisis Housing (Basic Center Programs): Basic Center Programs provide immediate, short-term housing as an alternative to the streets. Shelters geared toward youth have additional resources to create a smooth transition into stable housing.

Some of these resources include family counseling, trauma-informed services, recreation programs, and aftercare services to youth after they leave the shelter (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018a).

Transitional and Independent Living: Transitional housing is typically long-term housing that can last up to around two years. The type of housing provided can vary based on the individual's needs. For example, some transitional housing involves an on-site staff or supervisor, whereas others are more independent.

Transitional housing allows and encourages youth to develop skills and relationships with community services. It also provides an exit-strategy to ensure stability once individuals are no longer in the program (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018e).

Maternity Group Homes: Maternity Group Homes serve pregnant and parenting youth and their dependent children. In addition to providing shelter, Maternity Group Homes educate individuals on parenting, child development, family budgeting, health, and nutrition (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018b).

Host Homes: This is an additional form of temporary housing designed to get youth off the streets and transition them into stable housing. Hosts are community members who undergo a screening process and training. They provide safe shelter and food. Youth voluntarily decide to participate with a host home and are under supervision of a case manager, not the host.

Host homes are flexible in that they can be in a variety of locations: urban, rural, and suburban (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016).

Congregate Care: Congregate care consists of placement either in a group home or an institution that provides 24-hour care to the individuals placed there (Children's Bureau, 2015).

Independent Supervised Apartments: This term describes a variety of housing programs where youth live in either shared living arrangements or on their own and are provided with services while encouraged to be independent (Dion, Dworsky, Kauff, & Kleinman 2014).

RHY Case Management Services

Case management pairs a youth with a case worker to build a trusting relationship with the youth in order to provide guidance and advocate for the youth. Case workers also help the youth to create goals in terms of education, employment, and financial stability, and they develop a plan to achieve these goals (National Network for Youth, 2015).

EVIDENCE-BASED AND PROMISING PRACTICES IN RHY SERVICES

When determining how best to support youth with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness, VR professionals should keep in mind the following evidence-based and promising practices from the runaway and homeless youth service field.

- **Low-Barrier Services with Expectations:** In practice, low-barrier services are those that are typically unrestricted and have few expectations placed on the recipients of the service. Burdens such as paperwork and drug or alcohol testing are not required. This ensures that the shelter is accessible to all (BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, 2007).
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** This treatment is centered on ensuring that the individuals receiving the care are physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe. Service providers are trained to recognize signs of trauma and provide effective treatment (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2018).
- **Harm Reduction:** This practice looks at the risk resulting from a behavior and not the behavior itself (BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, 2007).
- **Positive Youth Development:** Positive youth development sees individuals as a resource, not as a problem that needs to be fixed. This strategy provides an array of services and opportunities that youth can tailor to their needs. The focus is on increasing protective factors by having individuals develop relationships with peers, adults, and the community. Youth are also taught skills which ease the transition into adulthood (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

- **Youth-Centric Approach:** A youth-centric focus enables service providers to understand the youth perspective and creates a welcoming environment for them. This encourages youth to remain engaged with the service (Hishida, 2016).
- **Development of Positive Youth-Adult Partnerships:** One effective way to prevent and end youth homelessness is through the development of positive youth and adult partnerships. These partnerships include youth who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness and adult advocates and experts in order to improve policy and practice with first-hand experience (National Network for Youth, 2018).
- **Teaching Decision-Making Skills:** Teaching homeless youth decision-making skills encourages them to avoid risky behaviors and enables them to take control over their future (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR RHY PROFESSIONALS

Providers are regularly challenged with transferring their personal intentions and experiences onto the youth they are charged with serving. Misconceptions on working with young people are molded from our past experiences; however, providers need to evaluate every situation for its uniqueness. As a standard of care for RHY providers, enacting proper boundaries is a requirement for their work (Meade & Slesnick, 2002). Boundary problems can range from mild to severe, but they are potentially harmful to youth and impact the quality of service they receive. Examples of boundary problems can be in the form of special favors, gifts, personal or financial gain, or sexual relationships.



ESTABLISHING RHY PARTNERSHIPS

Challenges to Obtaining, Engaging in, and Completing Services

Homelessness for young people is a very fluid and unstable experience, with most young people sleeping in multiple locations throughout the duration of their homelessness, such as shelters, couch-surfing, and streets (Morton et al., 2017). This lack of stability in location, connections to caring adults, and access to basic life needs makes it difficult for young people to access transportation, arrive to appointments on time, fill out paperwork and/or go to multiple locations to access services.

For minors, it is often very difficult or impossible for them to obtain a parental signature due to their family instability and likely family crisis. Therefore, if a parent or guardian signature is required for minors, most runaway and homeless youth will be unable to access VR services.

In addition, young people have had complicated relationships with the adults in their lives and may be isolated from their families or other support systems. These strenuous relationships with adults result in mistrust and alienation (Wright and Ruel, 2017), which may persist when working with service providers.

Recommendations

VR professionals need to build trust with young people who are experiencing homelessness. This can be achieved by developing a youth advisory board (YAB) that allows young people to be part of the internal policy decision process within the VR agency. The opportunity to make decisions should be a central part of any youth programming. Opportunities to increase youth voice can have a major impact on building trust among young people (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010).

VR professionals should work with their local RHY provider to conduct warm handoffs with

youth who are eligible for VR services. A warm handoff is a transfer of care between two members of a system, where the handoff occurs in front of the young person. This transparent handoff of care allows young people to hear what is said and engages young people in communication, giving them the opportunity to clarify or correct information or ask questions about their situation (Chatterjee, So, Dunleavy, & Oken, 2017). VR professionals can find a RHY provider near their service area using the following online directory: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth>.

VR agencies should offer open hours for young people experiencing homelessness, so that there is flexibility when a young person can meet with someone in order to access services. This may include having a VR professional offer evening or weekend hours to meet with young people. In addition, services can be provided at the location of the young person (e.g., conduct programming at the RHYA provider site).

VR agencies ought to think about re-evaluating current policies that require documentation, such as a photo ID, social security card, or a birth certificate, prior to the start of services. Ideally, VR professionals should work with the young person and the RHY provider to ensure these documents are being obtained before the first meeting (Kalb & Pokempner, 2017). While identification is vital to a youth's success as an adult, it can be extremely challenging to obtain when the person who needs the identification is homeless and is a youth or young adult who does not have a parent or family to provide assistance.

It is important for VR professionals to establish a collaborative relationship with RHY providers in their service area, to reach out and introduce themselves, as well as

inquire about the services the RHY program offers, and be clear that the VR agency wants to establish a working relationship with organizations that will benefit youth with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness. It may take some time to establish a strong working relationship, but young people experiencing homelessness that VR is serving will benefit from being able to access RHY provider services. In addition, RHY's young clients with disabilities will benefit from the assistance that VR centers can provide.

CONCLUSION

VR professionals are on the frontline in the fight to end youth homelessness and can collaborate with RHY providers to assist youth in becoming economically independent. RHY providers require a combination of developmentally-appropriate housing and service options. At the systematic level, this approach depends on close collaboration between agencies, such as VR services and RHY service providers.

This collaboration will require a client-centered care approach to service provision rooted in an understanding of each RHY's needs and perspectives. Customized individual treatment "starts where the youth is at," (National Network For Youth, 2016) allowing RHY to identify strengths, clarify goals, and set a path toward achievement. RHY are extremely resilient young people with great capabilities. Their circumstance of homelessness is no indication of their aptitude or abilities. Young people can and do achieve great things in life, when they are able to access the support they need and build strong relationships with caring adults. VR professionals can be that caring adult.

DEFINITIONS

There are a variety of federal definitions of runaway and homeless youth. Below are some of the most relevant ones used.

HOMELESSNESS

- **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) definition:**

RHYA defines homeless youth as individuals who are "...not more than 21 years of age...for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative and who have no other safe alternative living arrangement" (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018c).

- **U.S. Department of Education (ED) definition:**

ED defines homelessness as "lacking a fixed, regular, and nighttime residence" or an "individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is: a) a supervised or publicly [sic] operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill; or c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings" (McKinney-Vento Act, 2012).

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition:**

HUD categorizes homelessness into four areas:

1. Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (includes a subset for an individual who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided);
2. Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;
3. Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; and
4. Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2011).

COUCH-SURFING

RHY living in unstable and/or temporary living arrangements such as the couches or spare bedrooms of friends, lovers, or other family members (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2013).

THROWNAWAY YOUTH

A term used to describe two types of circumstances: 1) A child who is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and with the child out of the household overnight; or 2) A child who is away from home and is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2013).

UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

A youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian (this means that the youth is not living with a parent or guardian and includes youth who are residing with a caregiver who does not have legal guardianship and youth who are living on their own) that lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Practitioners may use this term to differentiate between youth that are unaccompanied and homeless from those that are still connected to a family that is experiencing homelessness (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2013).

INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY

The American with Disabilities Act (1990) defines an individual with a disability as someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a disability but are regarded as having a disability.

RESOURCES

- State by State Non-Driver Identification Requirements (National Network for Youth, 2019):
https://www.nn4youth.org/learn/resources/state_ids
- Find the RHYA funded program in your community using the Family and Youth Services Bureau Map:
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/grants/fysb-grantees>
- Young people in need of housing and services can contact the 24/7 RHY National Communications System via call, text, or chat using the National Runaway Safeline:
<https://www.1800runaway.org> or 1-800-RUNAWAY
- Learn more about the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs:
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/programs/runaway-homeless-youth>
- Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago's comprehensive research on youth homelessness:
<http://voicesofyouthcount.org>
- National Network for Youth's Proposed System to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness:
<https://www.nn4youth.org/learn/proposed-system>

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4301 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 100, Washington, D.C. 20008
202-822-8405 | www.iel.org | iel@iel.org