Transitioning to independent living: Experiences of homeless young adults in rapid rehousing

Kristen Gurdak [a],[*], Lynden Bond [a], Deborah Padgett [a], Robin Petering [b]

[a] New York University, Silver School of Social Work, Washington Square North, New York, NY 10003, USA
[b] Lens Co, USA

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A B S T R A C T

Rapid rehousing (RRH) is an intervention that is being adopted nationally to assist adolescents and emerging adults who are homeless. RRH provides short-term rental assistance for independent scattered-site housing, in addition to an array of support services for approximately 12–24 months. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of young adults (18–23 years old) who had previously been homeless and who were enrolled in RRH programs set in two urban Northeastern cities, and their subsequent preparedness for independent living. Our sample mostly consisted of non-Hispanic Black females, many of whom identified as LGBTQ. Semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$) were conducted after participants had been in the program for nine months - three months prior to their initial program completion date. Thematic analysis revealed three themes: the importance of tangible support, communication among all parties: staff lead the way, and "I gotta start learning to do it on my own". These domains provided essential assistance for young people to attain their goals and through this process they learned skills to live independently and transition into adulthood. These findings suggest that rapid rehousing programs and service providers should focus on these domains to facilitate successful transition to independent living for this population.

1. Introduction

The rate at which young adults experience homelessness has increased over the last decade (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018). An estimated 3.5 million young adults experience homelessness annually (Morton et al., 2018). Unaccompanied young people face increased risk of health concerns (i.e., unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, respiratory issues, poor nutrition, mortality), experiencing violence, risky sexual behavior, human trafficking, and mental health and substance use issues (Auerswald, Lin, & Parriott, 2016; Heerde, Hemphill, & Scholes-Balog, 2014; Kulik, Gaetz, Crowe, & Ford-Jones, 2011; Author, 2016a, 2016b; Santa Maria, Narendorf, Ha, & Bezette-Flores, 2015; Terry, Bedi, & Patel, 2010; Tyler & Johnson, 2006; Whitbeck, 2009). These risks have greater implications for young adults due to their developmental stage which can impact their skill development and executive functioning, such as decision making, inhibition, planning, and reasoning (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018). Earlier exposure to trauma and childhood adversity may have further implications on brain development and lead to increased impairments.

Although the experience of homelessness for young adults is similar to adults (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992), the multiple risk factors they face coupled with their crucial developmental stage create substantial barriers to exiting homeless (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018). During this transitional period in their lives, young adults have high social needs and desire for status among peers. They also want to have an active role in planning to attain goals for continuing education from high school, gaining employment for the first time, and developing their own self-identity (Levings, 2006). Compared to their adult homeless counterparts, young adults need additional assistance in employment, education, economic self-sufficiency, 'life-after-housing' skills, and housing stability, since for many this will be their first experience with these milestones (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016).

Young adults are in a unique position where they may not need or be eligible for intensive, long-term housing (i.e., permanent supportive housing, or PSH) which is typically reserved for adults with physical or mental disabilities. Many do not meet housing provider requirements of being capable of independent living typical of older adults. Therefore, rapid rehousing (RRH) has been looked upon as the most appropriate intervention to assist young people in exiting homelessness. RRH is a

program which combines short-term rental assistance and support services to transition young adults out of homelessness as quickly as possible (NAEH, 2019). Using tenets of the best practice of the PSH model, RRH provides time-limited (one to two years), independent, scattered-site housing coupled with rental subsidies and support services from community agencies (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013; Rodriguez & Eidelman, 2017). The stated goals of RRH are to assist individuals to obtain independent housing quickly, increase self-sufficiency, and remain stably housed after rental assistance ends (NAEH, 2019).

RRH has been used extensively with adults and families experiencing homelessness (NAEH, 2019) and research suggests that, when compared to emergency shelter or transitional housing, individuals enrolled in RRH programs are homeless for shorter periods of time (NAEH, 2019). RRH has also been shown to decrease employment issues, housing instability, substance use, and criminal justice involvement, as well as increase social support (Hignite & Haff, 2017). Since RRH is a time-limited program, identifying and understanding the transition out of RRH and into permanent housing is valuable in the context of utilizing RRH. Previous research investigating the transition out of RRH among adults has found that financial assistance and adequate case management were both predictors of successfully transitioning into permanent independent housing (Brown et al. 2018). However, without adequate support, RRH can result in a return to homelessness.

Previous literature exploring the use and outcomes of RRH has primarily focused on adults and families (Brown et al., 2018; Byrne, Thomas, Culhane, Kuhn, & Kane, 2016), with limited studies on RRH for young adults experiencing homelessness. One study found that 80% of youth provided RRH did not return to homelessness for at least six months (Rice et al. 2018). Another focused on how the intervention is being employed and if disparities exist with accessing this program (Hsu et al. 2019). However, what remains unknown is how RRH can address the unique needs of this population in order to maintain independent housing post-RRH. As RRH continues to develop as an intervention for ending youth homelessness, more research is needed to understand this program for this population and their unique needs for transitioning to permanent housing. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore the lived experience of young adults in RRH. Our primary research questions are: 1) How do young people in RRH describe their experiences in the program? 2) How do they view their preparedness for independent living after transitioning out of the program?

2. Methods

This study was conducted as part of a larger mixed methods study in two urban Northeastern cities that aimed to examine the impact of RRH on a variety of domains for young adults who have previously experienced homelessness. The goal of the two programs is to rapidly rehouse young adults and provide temporary financial assistance (for 12 months with the possibility of an extension for 24 months) and individualized case management to ensure long-term housing stability. The programs support young people by having them sign their own lease and giving them autonomy in selecting their housing option, with the goal of having them remain in their housing choice after the program is complete. To assist with this, the programs provide financial support for their housing but aim to instill skills of money management and paying bills. This is achieved through a 'payment contribution system' where participants pay a portion of the rent with increases each month until the participant contributes the full amount of rent by the completion of the program. Other services provided include career counseling and educational assistance, among other resources needed for their adjustment into housing. This qualitative study was embedded within the parent study to gain a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of participants in the RRH programs.

2.1. Participants

The qualitative sample ($n = 15$) included participants who were enrolled in the first wave of the parent study ($N = 22$). The original 22 individuals were sampled as part of the larger pilot study. All young persons were between 18 and 24 years old. All 22 individuals enrolled in the parent study were offered the opportunity to participate in the qualitative interviews, however, seven participants did not participate due to dropping out of the housing program and others were unreachable at the time of data collection. The sample for this qualitative study had a mean age of 20.8 years old, and was majority female ($n = 13$, 86.67%) and non-Hispanic Black ($n = 12$, 73.33%). Over half of the participants identified as LGBTQ ($n = 8$, 53.33%).

2.2. Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted nine months after enrolling in the RRH programs – three months prior to their initial program completion date. This timing was considered optimal in allowing sufficient time to experience the program but also to gain participants' perspectives as they were entering its final phase and contemplating their next transition. Prior to the interview, participants signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the qualitative supplement. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions about the process of enrollment, finding a place to live, challenges within the program or with learning independent living skills, relationships with staff, landlords, roommates and other relationships, the impact of the program on their lives, and plans regarding transitioning out of the program. Interviews lasted, on average, 30–45 min and took place either at the program office or in the participant's residence. Interviews were conducted by social work doctoral students trained in qualitative research, who had prior professional experience working with this population.

2.3. Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and cleaned of identifiable information prior to being uploaded to Dedoose software (version 8.2.14) for transcript management, analysis, and interpretation. Using a modified grounded theory approach, often associated with program evaluation (Author, 2016a, 2016b), a priori preliminary codes were identified that aligned with specific domains from the interview guide that were, in turn, drawn from the literature on young adults experiencing homelessness and transitional housing. At the same time, inductive coding was used to ensure capturing unanticipated information. The first two authors independently reviewed seven of the transcripts, utilizing both the a priori codes and inductively deriving codes emerging from the data. Using an iterative analysis process to continue to identify and develop codes, the authors met to discuss and come to consensus on the codes. A final codebook was developed when saturation was reached (i. e., no new codes were emerging).

Once consensus was reached without discrepancy, the remaining eight transcripts were coded using the codebook. Thematic analysis was then conducted by reading (and re-reading) coded excerpts and using memos to record analytic decisions and preliminary themes that addressed our research questions (Charmaz, 2006).

3. Results

Three themes emerged that described the experiences of the RRH program and participants' preparedness for transitioning out of their programs: the importance of tangible support, communication among all parties: staff lead the way, and "I gotta start learning to do it on my own". 'The importance of tangible support' discusses aspects about the program that prepared them for transitioning to independent housing. 'Communication among all parties: Staff lead the way' discuss

communication issues and the role case management played in mitigating issues and modeling effective communication. "'I gotta start learning to do it on my own'" focuses on how participants felt prepared to transition out as it relates to learning to be an adult and practicing independent living skills. Participants described the positive practices and aspects of each of these experiences, as well as negative experiences related to each of these themes.

3.1. The Importance of Tangible Support

Tangible support such as money management, Metro cards (for use of public transportation), employment assistance, and even necessities such as food and financial assistance was viewed by participants as critical to their transitioning into RRH. Coordination of care was also valued by the participants throughout their stay in RRH. Moving into and out of RRH each required similar but unique approaches to providing tangible support from the program and program staff. For example, one participant explained how RRH helped during the start of the program. The participant said:

Well, in the beginning we was like struggling for food…but they helped with that. You know, they would have the cans, the canned food, the closet full of food, they'll come back. And each of us, remind you, we all live in the same house. Each of us would get a big bag of something to take home. So that's something I appreciated.

Another participant described how the RRH agency provided help with money management, which helped them mature in a way that prepared them for moving on:

They help me manage my money. [Agency], their biggest thing is money management. They set me up with savings plans. Occasionally I follow them, occasionally I don't. But for the most part they're like big moms that kind of help you out, that's what I call them. They've really helped me grow, 'cause now I know… I can say I've had my own place.

Similarly, another participant mentions assistance with saving money which made them feel more prepared for independent housing:

I feel like I am ready [to move on], and I can say I am more so ready thanks to my case manager. By her always pushing me and always making sure I do have savings, even if it's $50 out of my paycheck she makes sure that I will input something up, she will make sure that I have enough metro cards to make sure that I am okay. She will give me the resources that I need if I am not okay.

Participants also spoke about the educational and career support provided by RRH case managers. Case managers encouraged participants to decide what services were most important to them. One participant explained how the providers supported their decision to enroll in school:

Today I went to go to my school so I could start being in the process for my classes, what you need to do. Because anybody can say something, but everybody doesn't do what they're saying. And [agency], it was like, I wanted it, they wanted it for me. They pushed me… to want it even more.

The benefit of the educational and career support was contingent upon the work that the participants put into the program. For example, one participant stated, "As long as you're very active in the program, and you're doing what you have to do, you're checking in, they are very helpful." Another participant described the personalized approach RRH staff took in assisting with employment, saying "For the jobs they always have, you know, the job, the career counselor, the career specialist is always there every Monday or something like that and always meeting with people to see where I'm at, always helping me with job interviews." The case management support helped participants find financial

stability, but the reliance on their personal motivation would be a value needed upon moving on from RRH.

In contrast, some participants felt that the tangible support provided by RRH programs was not enough when entering the program or in preparing them to graduate from it. One participant stated, "[The agency] didn't help me with shit. [The agency] didn't do shit. The landlord- we got a whole new landlord during the process as well. Also, with this whole process, [the agency] never helped me find a job." This participant felt that the program did not provide enough concrete employment assistance to prepare them to maintain stable housing. While the majority of participants had positive experiences with their programs, it is important to highlight that each experience in the program was unique to the individual and not everyone felt supported.

3.2. Communication Among All Parties: Staff Lead The Way

Communication with staff, landlords, and roommates was discussed at length in a variety of contexts. Participants had both positive and negative experiences with communication, and they expressed that communication was an important factor in their experience in the program. Many participants felt that the communication with RRH staff positively impacted their experience in RRH. *What* was communicated and *how* things were communicated to participants were both meaningful in building rapport and understanding the expectations for transitioning out of the program. One participant described their interactions with RRH staff:

They're [RRH staff] cool. They meet with you where you are. My vibe is real chill so they're not going to come at me like how they would come to a very peppy person. So, they kind of meet people where they are. They are able to communicate effectively based where we are as well.

Case managers played a large role in mediating the communication between the participant and their roommates and landlords. In many ways, this role provided a platform for modeling effective communication behavior that would be essential for maintaining housing stability. For many young people, their experience in RRH was their first exposure to the challenges of communicating with roommates and landlords. One individual discussed how RRH staff assisted in communication between roommates:

Living with friends do take a toll sometimes. You do bump heads, but the only bump heads that've really been bumping is the two best friends that moved in. So, it's not like really a "problem" problem. You know, they just get into their own things. We'll [case manager and roommates] write it out on a piece of paper, and we'll talk about all of us together though, and we'll all come up with something that may work for the household. I like that.

Several participants discussed the role staff played in communicating with landlords. For example, when asked if the staff had been helpful in liaising between landlords and participants, one participant stated,

The only reason why I feel like it's in the middle is because it's like the staff at [agency] is literally the middleman in our situation. So, it's like not only are they hearing my side, but they're hearing the landlord's side too. And it's like they're trying to put two and two together…

In their experience with navigating a relationship with a landlord, communication was discussed as an important skill needed to have and to practice prior to transitioning out of RRH. When talking about difficulties with communication to their landlords, one participant stated:

I feel like the communication has to better between the landlord and tenants, and the landlord and the manager, period. For me, I feel like that was the downfall in a way because the landlord wasn't trying to

communicate with the case manager in regard to certain things. And the landlord wasn't trying to communicate to us in regard to certain things, you know?

There were also negative experiences with communication as it related to their engagement with staff and the program requirements. One participant described hearing mixed messages from different staff. The participant said, "Like, one will say this, and then the other one will say that, and then when I confront both, it's like, they argue with each other like, "Why did you say that?" and "I didn't know you said that.""" Many negative experiences stemmed from a lack of communication about rent payment expectations. One participant stated:

… So, I was like, "Okay. Now I'm just confused."… So, basically for the first year that you're there, they support you for the whole thing. And you just have to maintain yourself. The second year was supposed to be when they make you pay your rent, but in portions, little bit little- this is what I was told. Little by little, so that by the end of that second year, you are able to pay that rent on your own and stand on your own two feet. If I would have knew one year you have, then I wouldn't have even entered the program, to be honest.

Although most participants were open to participating in the rent payment system set-up by RRH, the miscommunication about the payment amounts and timeline of payments created frustration among some participants. Similarly, another participant stated:

Yeah. And it was like "Okay, why are you guys doing contribution if you guys said that you guys would pay for 12 months?" I'm not too sure as to why they started doing it, they just told us that they were. And then they changed the contribution, so we can basically be able to afford to pay it. So, the first month would be 9 dollars, second month would be 41 dollars, third month would be this set, and it was just like so confusing. Cause if we didn't have that, and we didn't have our savings set aside, basically we would just have to pay 341 every month.

Communication was discussed as an important piece of learning to grow and mature, even the challenges associated with it provided learning opportunities. Further, participants regarded communication as essential in learning to navigate and manage expectations of the RRH program and feel prepared to live independently after the program ended.

"I Gotta Start Learning To Do It On My Own".

There was much to be said about learning to be an adult while in the RRH program. Participants felt they had room to grow and make mistakes, while knowing that there would be support with no judgments from staff. They felt that this self-determination, with support from case managers, was helpful for them to learn how to manage responsibilities on their own while in the program and in preparation for independent living. For example, one individual described how RRH staff provided support as they learned to navigate aspects of independent living:

My most challenging thing would be, well you know it's a house, so you gotta get reminded of when to take the garbage out and stuff like that. Sometimes it doesn't click in my head. Oh wait, today's Wednesday night, I'm gonna take the garbage out for Thursday.

The experiences around maturing, or 'growing-up', were described as 'practice' but with guidance from staff. For example, one participant said, "That's another thing that's really important too, about [agency]. People that is going to mold you into a better person, and I just think that's really cool." Participants identified that even with the support and guidance from case managers, maturing can be an uneasy experience.

They've [RRH case manager] mostly matured me. They made me mature a lot faster than I probably would have if I was still home… Now I'm out in the world, and I'm not prepared for it. And that was

my mom's biggest sorrow with me. When we made up, she said, "I'm sorry I didn't prepare you for any of the world. I forgot to tell you that these things can happen." And it's like, "I just wanted you under my wing, so now you have the stress of credit cards, rent, bills, everything else." It's scary.

In addition to the support provided, being able to make mistakes without judgement was an essential part of preparing for transitioning out of RRH. In describing their experience with RRH staff, one participant said, "I think it's just so dope because it's just like at the end of the day, they don't judge you for who you are." These discussions about support and maturing all led to their preparation for independent living. One participant stated:

I would say the biggest challenges was within myself, feeling like I couldn't do things or I wouldn't be able to take care of certain things by myself, or what if I need help or I can't get… I can't keep calling you guys for tote bags and things like that because I'm working now. And I have to realize this is stuff for people who is trying to get where I'm at that wants to do better too. I'm not the only person, so I'm really preparing myself to get, officially let [agency] go, not in a bad way but like I'll push off the nest, like all right, I have to start flying now, they can't hold my wings and help me fly so I gotta start learning to do it on my own.

The RRH programs impacted the participants' lives in a way that helped them grow and mature, whether they wanted it or not. One participant described the transition into being an 'adult', saying:

It was a huge change from being dependent to being independent. It was like, you basically stepping into a whole other world, and it's like oh dang. Do I even wanna adult anymore? Can I just go back? They was like, no, you didn't wanna go back, because you had a taste of your own freedom and it's just like, wow. This is a great taste.

Despite the challenges of learning to be an adult and navigating the RRH program, participants felt that these components of the program were essential for their ability to grow and transition to independent living.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of RRH programs for youth experiencing homelessness and their preparedness for transitioning to permanent housing. This analysis was conducted to gain insight from the unique narratives of young people in this type of housing program, including expectations, engagement with staff and others, employment, and preparedness for transitioning out of the program. While the study was limited to one qualitative interview per participant and follow-up interviews were not feasible, we believe the participants provided valuable insights into their experiences. We note that RRH for youth is still in early stages of programmatic development, and these interviews provide a timely report that can inform future research. There is the possibility that participants felt pressured by social desirability to report positive experiences since they were still enrolled in the housing program at the time of data collection. We attempted to counter the risk of social desirability in two ways: first, the participant was prompted at the beginning of the interview that their identity would be kept strictly confidential, and second, participants were assured that the researchers were university-based and independent of the programs.

Our thematic findings - the importance of tangible support, communication among all parties: staff lead the way, and "I gotta start learning to do it on my own" - highlight the most salient aspects of the RRH experience for these young people as they were preparing to transition out. Compared with their adult counterparts, young adults have more supports for returning to school, but they often lack work experience or skills to make enough money to move out of homelessness; therefore, financial assistance and supporting personal agency were

integral to their journey to independent living. Previous research shows that tangible assistance and effective case management services contribute to increased success of transition to permanent housing for adults and youth (Brown et al., 2018; Slesnick, Zhang, & Yilmazer, 2018) and our findings support this while considering the transitional period in young adults' lives. The financial assistance and resources in 'the importance of tangible support' theme is indicative of the support needed in case management services while considering the stage of life for young adults and the unique needs for this population.

Due to the transitional period in their lives, young adults "buy-in" to decisions when they play an active role in planning their future. Building autonomy and independence can help make a successful transition to independent living possible. Autonomy is stimulated by the RRH program by having them sign their own lease, utilize the rental contribution system, and actively engaging in the case management wrap-around services. In line with the idea of autonomy, the theme "I gotta start learning to do it on my own", is largely about learning to be an adult and with that comes the need to practice autonomy and independence. However, having the support to make mistakes along the way creates a learning opportunity for young adults to continue to develop their independent living skills. Previous literature supports that flexible program rules (Curry et al., 2021) and a less rigid program structure (Aykanian, 2018) is a more effective approach to service provision for young adults. Facilitating these aspects of the RRH program helps achieve the goals of policy makers whose intention is to increase self-sufficiency for young adults and develop their ability to remain stably housed after rental assistance ends (NAEH, 2019).

As individuals learn to manage new tasks in young adulthood, clear communication and expectations are essential for success in RRH programs and beyond. Prior literature identifies consistent communication as one of the more essential service provider practices that contribute to increased engagement with youth (Black et al., 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; Dixon, Funston, Ryan, & Wilhelm, 2011; Garret *et al.* 2008; Grace, Coventry, & Batterham, 2012; Rowan, Mason, Robitaille, Labrecque, & Tocchi, 2013). Further, effective communication and problem solving can assist in reducing transitional stress and stress related to maturation (Unger et al., 1998). Participants recognized the importance of having opportunities to practice effective communication, particularly relevant to living with other people and negotiating directly with landlords. This practice is necessary to create a conducive living environment whether with roommates or not, and to have the skills to advocate for themselves with landlords and other authority figures.

We acknowledge that the theme related to communication might appear to overlap somewhat with the "I gotta start learning to do it on my own" theme. However, the latter theme focused more on practicing the practicalities of adulthood (i.e., taking care of a home, paying bills, and saving money). Participants faced challenges and made mistakes during their time in RRH but expressed that all of these experiences were met with ample support from case managers, which enabled them to learn, grow, and feel prepared to move on from the housing program. Both the communication and support from services providers to learn practicalities of adulthood weighs heavily for the success of RRH programs. These themes highlight the skills and effectiveness needed from service providers to facilitate an experience for young adults to understand what it means to live independently after exiting homelessness. Specifically, service providers should be aware of how they model this behavior and communication for the young adult and encourage their autonomy when troubleshooting the challenging tasks of adulthood. Future reports from this project will document outcomes related to post-transition living among the participants.

In conclusion, this qualitative study demonstrates the importance of effective case management services and programmatic components for RRH for young adults. This study extends previous literature on RRH by focusing on young adults and providing a qualitative lens into their experiences with RRH. As federal funding for RRH is likely to grow to meet the short-term needs of adults and youth experiencing homelessness, this study fills an important gap in reporting on the experiences of youth living in RRH, expressed in their own words.

4.1. Lessons Learned

Based on the findings of this report, it is recommended that RRH programs facilitating services for young adults should focus on providing ample and effective tangible support (i.e., food and financial assistance, employment and education support, and money management skills), while exemplifying and encouraging the practice of effective communication, advocacy, and decision-making skills, and supporting the autonomy of the young adult. Future studies should expand upon these findings by utilizing post-RRH interviews for further follow-up and may benefit from the use of mixed methods to include objective measures of transition experiences.

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All persons who meet authorship criteria are listed as authors and certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript, **Kristen Gurdak:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data curation, Validation, Formal analysis, Roles/Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Lynden Bond:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Roles/Writing – original draft, **Deborah Padgett:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Robin Petering:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Kristen Gurdak, LCSW New York University Silver School of Social Work Kristen Gurdak is a licensed clinical social worker and a PhD student at New York University Silver School of Social Work. She has worked as a program director for and in direct practice with individuals experiencing serious mental illness and housing instability. Her research interests include community integration, mental health, homelessness, and housing interventions. Contributions: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data curation, Validation, Formal analysis, Roles/Writing – original draft, Project administration

Lynden Bond, LMSW New York University Silver School of Social Work Lynden Bond is a licensed social worker and a PhD student at New York University Silver School of Social Work. She has spent the last decade working in a variety of direct-practice and advocacy roles working for and with people experiencing homelessness. Her research interests include homelessness and housing policy and behavioral health services. Contributions: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Roles/Writing – original draft

Deborah Padgett, PhD New York University Silver School of Social Work Dr. Deborah K. Padgett has a doctorate in anthropology and is a professor at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. Dr. Padgett is known for her expertise in qualitative/mixed methods and the 'Housing First' approach to ending homelessness. Contributions: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision

Robin Petering, PhD Lens Co. Dr. Petering is a community-based researcher at Lens Co, a research and implementation consulting enterprise. Dr. Petering currently oversees several evaluation contracts with agencies across the country that serve young people experiencing homelessness. Dr. Petering's approach to research and evaluation is to prioritize inclusiveness and equity for all individuals and agencies involved in any given project and is informed by her personal experience as front-line worker and volunteer in agencies that serve this population. Contributions: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition