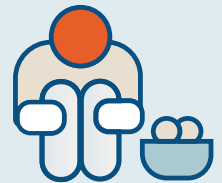# *Hopeways to Home:*

## Transitional Age Youth and Recovery Housing Toolkit

### *A Window Into Recovery Housing for Transitional Age Youth*

**10% of people 18-25 will experience homelessness each year**, along with **3% of youth 13-17** (*National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2024*).

**89%** of **homeless youth 16-19** meet the criteria for a mental health disorder, compared to **30% of all youth** in that age group (*Winiarski et al., 2020*).

**39%-70%** of **homeless youth** experience substance use challenges (*Gomez et al., 2010; Green et al., 2020*).

**Heroin use is significantly higher among homeless adolescents (28%) than among housed adolescents (1.3%)**, as is harmful use of prescription opioids (31.3% vs. 12.9%) (*Liu et al., 2022*).

**Only 10%-15% of homeless youth** receive substance use treatment (*National Network for Youth, 2008*).

**Transitional age youth** who are homeless experience a nearly **10 times higher mortality rate** than their housed peers, primarily due to suicide and substance use (*Burke et al., 2025*).

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# Recovery Roadblocks

### Comorbidity

Transitional age youth who experience homelessness are also likely to have experienced trauma, foster care, juvenile justice system involvement, poor social support, substance use and mental illness (*National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015; Coren et al., 2016*).

### Costs

Loss of health insurance coverage, limited financial resources and limited housing resources for transitional age youth increase substance use and homelessness risks (*AACAP, 2024*).

### Coordination

In addition to housing, transitional age youth who are homeless need coordinated educational, employment, life skills, physical health, mental health and recovery services.

### Change

Transitional age youth must navigate multiple major life changes at once; unpredictability in their lives often clashes with rigid service models.

### Client factors

Various factors may limit engagement with services, including internalized expectations of independence, low perception of risks related to substance use, suspicion toward care providers and lack of stable supports (*Nyamathi et al., 2007*).

### Constricting criteria

Requiring treatment adherence, abstinence from substances and engagement with services as criteria for housing limits opportunities to decrease long-term substance use and homelessness (*Gaetz, 2023*).

# Hope Is Home: Key Features of Hopeways

Too few resources exist to support transitional age youth who need recovery and housing support, but several common key features can increase their viability, success and sustainability. It is vital to make housing the highest priority, connect youth to a continuum of care resources and ensure client-centered approaches (Schoenberger et al., 2022).

## Housing First focused

Rapid Rehousing and Housing First models emphasize fast, unconditional access to housing (*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.*).

## Flexible

Client-centered approaches emphasize choice and can adapt to clients' immediate priorities and needs (*Barker et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2023*).

## Novel

Technology-based engagement tools like digital peer spaces, gamified psychoeducation and telehealth make it easier for transitional age youth to use services (*Litvin et al., 2023*).

## Trauma informed

Collaborative, client-centered, reliable service environments preserve dignity and improve outcomes for transitional age youth (*Hopper et al., 2018*).

## Hopeway Highlights

### YBMen

- YBMen is the University of Michigan's award-winning, evidenced-based mental health intervention for young Black men.
- Private social media groups provide mental health education and social support.
- Evidence shows that the program improves mental health knowledge and decreases depression symptoms (*Lehtimaki et al., 2021*).

### Watch Me Rise

- Watch Me Rise is a wraparound services intervention to prevent recurrent homelessness among youth 18-24 who were previously in the foster care system.
- A team of natural and formal supports provide comprehensive, individualized support via a shelter for transitional age youth.
- The program provides improved housing stability and employment readiness (*Lindquist-Grantz et al., 2022*).

# Housing

To effectively support the recovery and housing needs of transitional age youth, the outlined principles must serve as a foundation for defining clear desired outcomes, recognizing obstacles and allocating resources for prevention, intervention and retention (*Gaetz & Dej, 2017*).

## Desired Outcomes

Housing is the primary goal and must be achieved as quickly as possible. This is the most important way to help transitional age youth engage in recovery services and transition into independent adulthood with sustainable, positive mental and physical health.

## Obstacles

- Unhoused transitional age youth in need of recovery services wait too long for the limited resources that provide housing and ongoing, comprehensive supports (*Kozloff et al., 2013*).
- Linking housing to service engagement and/or abstinence from substances can perpetuate and prolong a cycle of trauma, high-risk behaviors and untreated substance use disorder and mental health needs (*Wang et al., 2019*).

## Resources

### Prevention

Diversion programs focus on preventing entry into homelessness through rapid, strategic solutions (*Community Solutions, 2024*).

### Intervention

### Rapid Rehousing

Rapid Rehousing programs quickly offer permanent housing that's tailored to the preferences of transitional age youth, along with financial support and proactive case management (*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.; Slesnick et al., 2023*).

### Housing First for Youth

This rights-based intervention is grounded in the concept that adequate housing is a basic human right and a precondition for recovery (*Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.*).

**Independent living support**

- Scattered-site transitional housing: Housing locales embedded in the community through agency-held lease of private residences (*National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015*)
- Host homes: Shelter provided in trained community members' homes
- Housing subsidies (*National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015*)
- Congregate structured housing (*National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015*)

### *Retention*

Identify and track transitional age youth who would benefit from services (*Community Solutions, 2024*).

Secure adequate funding for programs via the Department of Housing and Urban Development, intensive aftercare programs for juvenile offenders, and family unification/reunification programs for youth aging out of foster care (*National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014*).

Provide trauma-informed housing solutions that create emotional safety in housing environments via psychological first aid (*Munson et al., 2013*).

# *Opportunities*

## *Desired Outcomes*

Once transitional age youth in recovery are successfully housed, they need stable income, education and supportive social networks. Programs and strategies to help them obtain these resources are critical (*Markoulakis et al., 2023*).

## *Obstacles*

- Lack of access, costs and the mismatch between the needs of transitional age youth and the services offered complicate their ability to receive essential, comprehensive services beyond stable housing (*Bardine & Palomo, 2020*).

- Transitional age youth who are unhoused and use substances often have engaged with multiple different, disjointed service systems that lack a whole-person approach to recovery.

## Resources

### *Prevention*

**Vocational rehab**

This supports successful integration into the workforce for people with disabilities (*Courtney et al., 2019*).

**Youth Villages LifeSet**

This program offers 1:1 case-management for transitional age youth and addresses crises, employment, housing and more (*Ferguson, 2018*).

### *Intervention*

**YouthBuild/Job Corps**

Train-and-place models educate and train transitional age youth based on employer needs (*Ferguson et al., 2012*).

**Individualized placement and support**

Adapted for transitional age youth, this program can provide jobs, coaching, mental health services and supports (*Ferguson, 2007*).

**Social enterprises**

Train-while-place models establish agency-owned business staffed by transitional age youth (*Ferguson, 2013*).

**Full-service Community Schools Program**

The Department of Education provides comprehensive resources to help youth achieve their education goals (*AACAP, n.d.*).

### Retention

Support motivation for independence and self-directed lifestyle choices (*Community Shelter Board, 2018*).

Employ peers as teachers for basic life skills (*Community Shelter Board, 2018*).

## Hopeway Highlight

### HOME (Housing, Opportunities, Motivation and Engagement)

This current randomized controlled trial is measuring a supportive housing intervention aimed at preventing opioid use disorder among youth experiencing homelessness. It provides a rental and utility voucher, strengths-based advocacy, motivational interviewing and HIV education.

Preliminary findings from a pilot with 21 youth showed strong engagement and substantially improved housing retention (*Ahrens et al., 2023; Slesnick et al., 2021*).

# Physical and Psychiatric/Recovery Care

## Desired Outcome

Access to essential medical, mental health and recovery services is paramount for youth facing disruptions in care due to aging out of systems and the instability caused by substance use, mental illness and/or homelessness. Comprehensive housing support must incorporate health care resources for optimal outcomes (*DeHart et al., 2021*).

## Obstacles

- Homeless youth can be up to six times more likely to meet the criteria for two or more disorders and up to 17 times more likely to meet the criteria for an individual disorder, yet only about 1 in 3 receive appropriate services (*Whitbeck et al., 2004*).

- Lack of transportation, transience, costs, stigma and limited trust often prevent transitional age youth who require recovery, mental health and medical care from obtaining vital services (*Chelvakumar et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2020*).

## Resources

### Prevention

**Critical Time Intervention**

Intensive case management services for periods of specific transition can be used to ensure transitional age youth's uninterrupted access to mental health, medical and recovery care, which may decrease their risk of becoming unhoused (*Vijverberg et al., 2017*).

### Intervention

**Youth Assertive Community Treatment**

Multidisciplinary teams, seeking to increase treatment motivation and access for youth, deliver care directly in their environments when comorbidities or complexities limit standard service usage (*Broersen et al., 2024*).

**Shelter-based clinics**

These clinics provide in-person therapy and medication services for transitional age youth who reside in shelters.

**Street medicine/mobile clinics**

These clinics meet youth wherever they are with immediate medical care, referrals for continued care and flexibility around follow-up.

**Redefining recovery strategies**

Recognize gradual reduction strategies, minimization of highest risk substance use patterns, and holistic recovery definitions, which may resonate more with the values and goals of transitional age youth.

### *Retention*

**Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach**

This intervention seeks to strengthen community connections among transitional age youth and encourage them to invest in rewarding lifestyle choices that do not involve substances (*Zhang & Slesnick, 2018*).
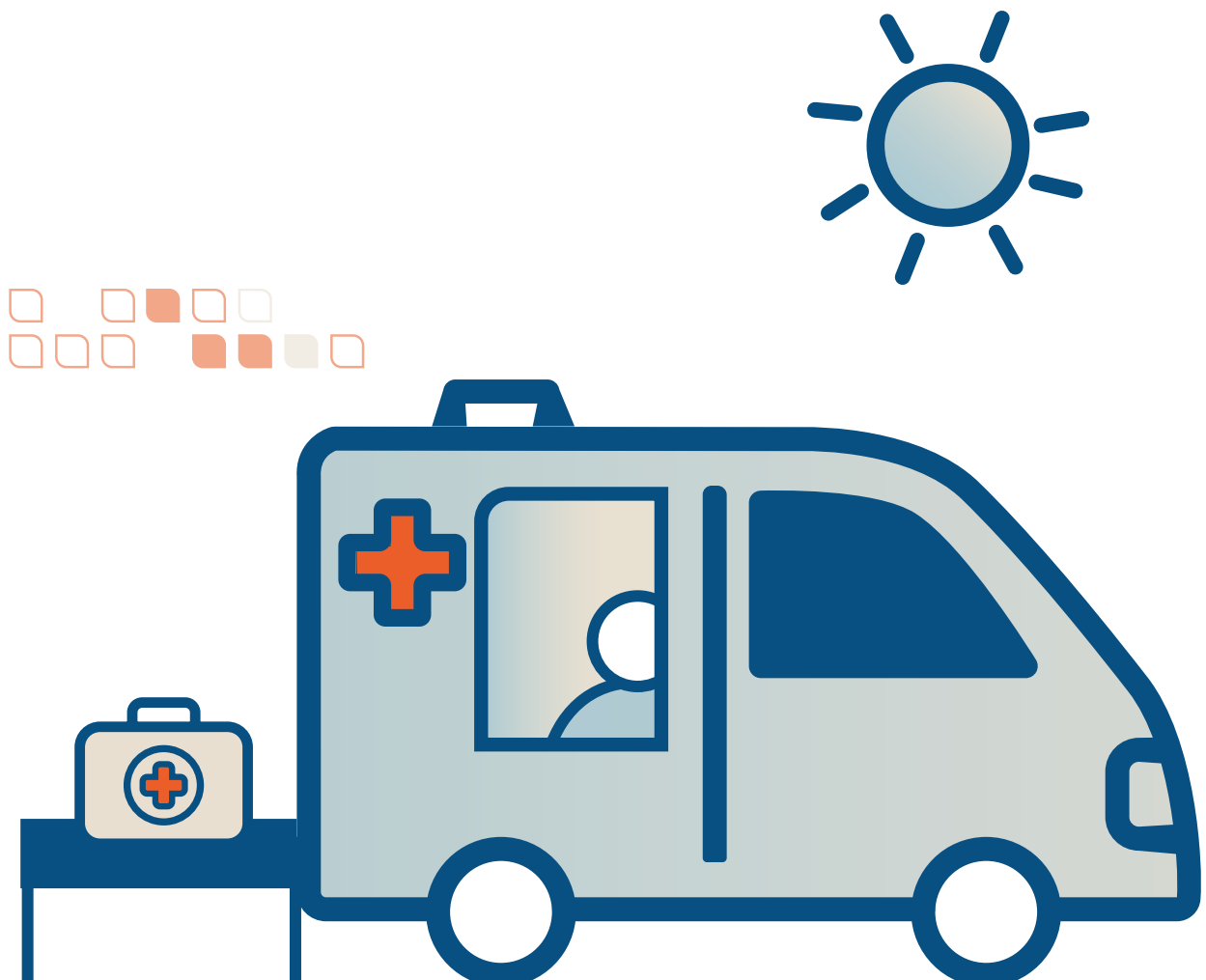
# *Empowerment*

## *Desired Outcome*

Efforts to serve homeless transitional age youth must involve active agency, state-level and national policy strategies, partnerships and measurement approaches. This allows them to effectively maintain integrated efforts to decrease homelessness and promote recovery among transitional age youth.

## *Opportunities*

- Despite provision of some resources, the lack of adequate funding and fidelity to proven models continues to limit the effectiveness of recovery housing efforts for transitional age youth.

- Continued advocacy for laws and funding structures that extend care to a larger demographic of transitional age youth with broader access offerings is imperative for successful outcomes.

## Resources

### *Advocacy*

**McKinney-Vento/EHCY**

This program provides resources for homeless youth, such as enrollment streamlining, transportation, academic support and a mandated liaison to ensure enforcement (*U.S. Department of Education, 2018*).

**Runaway and Homeless Youth Act**

This federal program funds emergency shelter, transitional living and street outreach to youth 16-22 (*Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2025*).

**Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program**

This initiative encourages the development of coordinated community approaches to end youth homelessness (*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2025*).

## *Measurement*

### Framework to End Youth Homelessness

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2013) identified outcomes such as stable housing, employment/education, social connections and wellbeing as key parameters for assessment of program effectiveness.

### Measuring Up

This comprehensive guide includes outcome measures to establish consistency, common expectations and continuous improvement (*Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2019*).

### The West Coast Convening Framework

This evidence-based guide measures parameters such as housing, employment and education to reflect effectiveness and guide the evolution of programs (*YouthCare, 2018*).
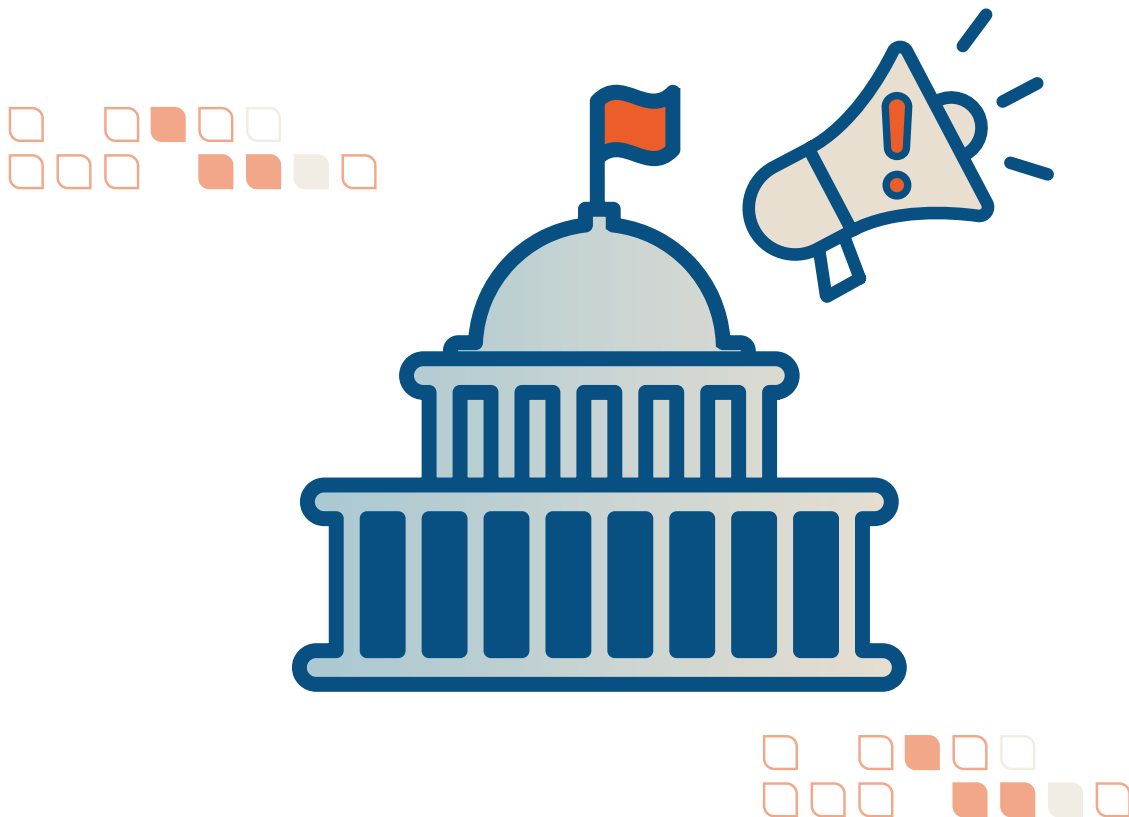
# Guide to Navigating Hopeways

These additional resources and tools can help individual and organizational service providers better support transitional age youth who need housing and recovery supports.

- An Introduction to Housing First for Youth

- Jump Start Tool: Rapid Re-Housing for Youth

- National Alliance to End Homelessness Diversion Toolkit

- National Alliance for Recovery Residences

- National Network for Youth: Complex Trauma Impact on Youth Experiencing Homelessness

- Runaway and Homeless Youth Training, Technical Assistance and Capacity Building Center

- SchoolHouse Connection: Tips for Helping Homeless Youth Succeed in College

- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness: Partnerships for Opening Doors — Integrating Employment and Housing Strategies to Prevent and End Homelessness

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