

GUIDE TO GIVING

Improving Outcomes for Homeless Youth



EDUCATION AND
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Are you interested in helping homeless youth? This guide will help you assess the effectiveness of the programs you are considering supporting. It is based on Social Impact Research's (SIR) methodology for analyzing programs, which identifies the best approaches for addressing the targeted social issue. For more information, read SIR's social issue and state reports on improving outcomes for homeless youth.

An effective organization should incorporate all components of the recommended approach or have partnerships with other organizations to cover the full range of services included in these components.

In addition, these organizations should collect data to measure the outcomes and impact of their programs.

- A. Extensive outreach
- B. Proactive family reconciliation
- C. Youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services
- D. Outcomes and impact



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Program uses formal system for tracking the homeless youth population and changes outreach locations to better fit population needs

Program trains staff in effective street-based case management

STEP 1 Understanding the Recommended Approach to Improving Outcomes for Homeless Youth

SIR recommends that donors interested in improving outcomes for homeless youth support flexible and individualized approaches. These approaches seek to provide youth with stable housing while assisting them in building skills and social supports that will allow them to return home or live independently. Services for homeless youth are comprised of three components, outlined below.

DEFINITION

Homeless youth, also called unaccompanied youth, are defined by the McKinney-Vento Act as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."¹ This report focuses on youth aged 15-24 who are separated from their families or guardians. They do not have serious mental health or other issues that require long-term residential care. With support, housing, and training, they can become capable of living independently.

COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Youth homelessness programs vary widely. SIR has found that high-quality programs have the following components:

- **Extensive outreach** to effectively find and connect with homeless youth through multiple channels
- Based on individualized needs assessments, programs should be able to support youth in one of the following two paths:
 - **Proactive family reconciliation** programs for youth who can and want to return home
 - **Youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services** to provide long-term services, including housing, for youth who cannot return home

1. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 USC 11302 103 (a).

STEP 2 Evaluate the Program's Effectiveness through the Lens of the Recommended Approach

A. Evaluate the quality of extensive outreach

Programs actively find and connect with homeless youth, who are often afraid to look for assistance or unaware of services available to them, and help them engage with appropriate programs.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Street outreach team goes at regularly scheduled times to at least one location frequented by homeless youth
- ✓ Drop-in center (where youth can eat, use a computer, or have a safe place to sit for a few hours) located in an area convenient for homeless youth

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Street outreach team has no fixed schedule and goes to locations on an ad hoc basis with little attention to which areas are frequented by homeless youth
- ✗ Drop-in center location chosen without regard for ease of youth access and does not have regularly scheduled hours

- ✓ Staff focus on relationship building with youth, assist youth to meet their basic needs, and refer youth to long-term services
- ✗ Staff do not focus on relationship building, only provide limited services, and do not have the knowledge to refer youth to long-term services

B. Evaluate the effectiveness of proactive family reconciliation

Programs give youth a safe place to reside while working with the whole family to ensure that youth can resolve the problems that caused them to leave so they can eventually return home to a more supportive environment.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Program has youth-specific temporary shelter
- ✓ Youth are assigned case managers who
 - Conduct needs assessments to determine whether youth are better off returning home or entering a long-term housing program
 - Oversee youth's services for duration of the program
 - Work with youth to develop individualized written service plans
- ✓ On-site individual and family counseling and crisis response services are available to all youth; staff are trained in crisis response

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Program houses youth in adult shelter or does not offer youth any temporary housing
- ✗ Case managers
 - Are not assigned to specific youth to oversee their services during the program
 - Do not work with youth to develop written, individualized plans
- ✗ Counseling services are not available to all; staff are not trained in how to handle a crisis



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Program provides private and shared room options for youth in temporary shelter

Program offers home-based family counseling services, even after youth have exited the temporary shelter

Program assists youth in developing an exit plan and checks in with youth six months after their program exit

C. Evaluate the effectiveness of youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services

These programs help youth who cannot return home by providing a flexible and individualized array of services to help youth take control of their lives and eventually become independent. The four services described below are subcomponents of youth-centered transitional housing and supportive services.

i. Case management and social support development

These programs assign youth to case managers who support them in multiple ways.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Youth are assigned case managers who
 - Oversee all youth services for the duration of the program
 - Help youth to connect with people and community resources that can support them (i.e., mentoring programs, support groups, local sports teams)
 - Help youth maintain contact with their families if desired
 - Have case loads of no more than 20 youth

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Case managers
 - Are not assigned to specific youth
 - Do not assess youth's existing social support networks or help build relationships
 - Do not support youth in contacting family
 - Have case loads of more than 20 youth



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Program offers in-house peer support groups based on youth's interests and needs; these may include women's or men's discussion groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) support groups

Program checks in with youth regularly for one year after they leave the program

- ✓ All youth undergo detailed needs assessments with case managers to develop individualized, written service plans
- ✗ Program staff conduct ad hoc assessments of youth cases and long-term needs; service plan is not tailored to individual needs; program staff assist youth with planning only if requested

ii. Housing

These programs offer youth multiple transitional housing options to accommodate different needs.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Several transitional housing options with varying levels of supervision depending on youth's level of independence; one option should be that the program assists youth in renting their own apartments in the community

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Program refers all youth to same type of housing without assessing their level of independence

iii. Basic needs

These programs help youth meet their basic needs through a variety of services.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Regular allowance provided to youth for food, transportation, rent, and other living costs
- ✓ Program has formal partnership with a doctor who holds regular hours at the program facility; program staff assist youth in finding specialized and emergency medical care if needed
- ✓ Individual counseling offered with counselors who have experience working with at-risk youth
- ✓ Services provided to assist youth with overcoming legal challenges if applicable (i.e., obtaining government identification, handling criminal charges)

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Financial assistance provided irregularly or only at youth's request
- ✗ Program refers youth to outside medical providers on a limited basis; program staff do not assist with finding specialized medical care if needed
- ✗ No behavioral healthcare or counseling offered to youth
- ✗ Little or no support provided to youth in dealing with any legal issues



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

In-house medical clinic offers scheduled appointments and is open at all hours for emergencies

Individual and group counseling options offered to youth with staff who have specialized training in issues including social reintegration, substance abuse, LGBTQ issues, and any other population-specific needs

iv. Skills development

These programs help youth develop skills that will enable them to live as self-sufficient adults.



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Program has relationships with local employers that can hire program participants

Program teaches youth higher-level soft skills such as time management, leadership, critical thinking, and communication with colleagues and supervisors

Program uses a formal curriculum to teach life skills, such as the Ansell Casey curriculum

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Program helps youth reach the next level of education through GED preparation, tutoring, and assistance with applications for college or other postsecondary education
- ✓ Program prepares youth for the workforce through training programs and job search assistance
- ✓ Life skills (i.e., cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping) taught through regularly scheduled classes and informal hands-on training
- ✓ Financial literacy taught with formal curriculum and classes to help youth budget and become financially independent

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Limited to no educational support offered; youth may be referred to outside educational programs on an ad hoc basis
- ✗ Program provides limited assistance to prepare youth for workforce; limited training and/or informal job search assistance
- ✗ No formal life skills training offered; staff may help youth with life skills informally if requested
- ✗ No formal financial literacy training offered

Collecting outcome data enables organizations to track long-term program effectiveness in improving the lives of their participants. High-performing organizations collect and analyze a wide variety of data to measure the effectiveness of their programs. Organizations use the data to build upon their successes and improve upon their weaknesses.

D. Evaluate outcomes and impact

Programs should track indicators in three outcome areas: housing stability, educational attainment, and employment retention. These are considered the most important basic steps on the path to self-sufficient adulthood. Appropriate indicators may vary for different types of programs, and it is important for interested donors to have a conversation with organizations regarding how they track the success of their programs as they relate to participant outcomes. Below are examples of indicators.

Component of the Approach	Outcome Indicators
Outreach	<p>Housing stability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth who enroll in housing <p>Educational attainment and employment retention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth who enroll in long-term services, including education or job training
Family Reconciliation	<p>Housing stability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth who remain stably housed and have not run away from home again 12 months after program exit
Transitional Housing and Supportive Services	<p>Housing stability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth who make a transition to independent housing and remain stably housed 12 months after program exit <p>Educational attainment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth showing educational advancement <p>Employment retention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Percentage of youth who gain employment during the program and remain employed 12 months after program exit

In addition to these three outcomes, other more subjective outcomes, such as stability and level of social support, are difficult to measure, and experts are working to develop metrics. More funding is needed to enable the field to better evaluate homeless youth programs.

STEP 3 Evaluate the Organization's Health and Stability

Evaluating an organization's health and stability will provide insight into its structure, capacity, and ability to carry out its mission. It is important to consider at least two factors:

- A. Financial sustainability**, which describes an organization's ability to conduct its work in a fiscally responsible manner
- B. Management and governance**, which describes the leadership and oversight of the organization

A. Evaluate financial sustainability

The information below can be found on the organization's 990, an IRS form required of most nonprofits. It is best to review three to five years' worth of financial information.

FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE	FINANCIALLY UNSUSTAINABLE
✓ Organization's debt-to-equity ratio is less than 1.5, meaning its debt is manageable given its assets	✗ Debt-to-equity ratio is greater than 1.5; substantial amount of assets are directed to paying off debt
✓ Organization's current ratio is equal to or greater than one, meaning its assets are greater than its short-term debt	✗ Current ratio is less than one; the organization will continue to accumulate short-term debt as its assets are not enough to cover its debt
✓ Organization maintains three to six months in cash reserves, so it can withstand brief financial downturns	✗ Organization maintains fewer than three months in cash reserves, leaving it susceptible to economic shocks
✓ Program funding comes from a variety of sources, including philanthropies and government, and might rely on partnerships with legal services organizations or private pro bono support	✗ Funding is dominated by one source or type of funder; if funding comes entirely from federal sources, the programs' ability to serve all at-risk populations or assist in all types of law may be restricted

B. Evaluate management and governance

Management and governance indicators describe the capacity of senior staff and board members to expand an organization and deliver on and hold themselves accountable to the mission.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION	INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION
✓ CEO has significant experience; management team members have good working relationship with each other and external stakeholders; staff are actively involved in youth homelessness field; program staff have experience working with at-risk youth	✗ Inexperienced CEO and management team with no plans to build capacity; management team cannot convey program or model succinctly, has limited experience working with youth
✓ Board has at least seven members with diverse experience, including legal, management, financial, marketing, and fundraising; meets at least three times per year	✗ Board is comprised of individuals with similar—not diverse or complementary—skills and experience; meetings are rare; members play little or no role in fundraising, oversight, or planning
✓ Planning shows evidence of measurable long-term and short-term goals	✗ Planning occurs ad hoc; for example, in an annual meeting where possible changes are discussed informally



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

CEO is an active leader in the field; management team brings extensive experience with issues faced by homeless youth

Three- to five-year goal-driven planning with measurable indicators, concrete time frame, and industry analysis; various stakeholders engaged in the process, including current and former youth participants

Organization involves youth participants and program alumni in planning and staff hiring

STEP 4 Evaluate the Organization's Ability to Foster Systemic Impact

There are many ways in which an organization can influence the field of youth homelessness. These include conducting impact and outcome research, providing consulting and training to other programs, and publicly advocating for policies relating to youth homelessness. SIR recommends considering three categories of activities:

- A. Growth plans**, which describe the organization's plans for the next three to five years
- B. Community partnerships**, which demonstrate the organization's ability to work collaboratively
- C. Field-building activities**, which show whether the organization is considering the big picture

A. Evaluate growth plans

Evaluate growth plans to understand the organization's capacity to further its mission and reach more people:

- Organization has a realistic growth plan with adequate funding and measurable goals
- Organization continuously seeks to manage its network of partner organizations to better provide support services and create a sense of community for homeless youth
- Organization takes input from current and former youth participants into consideration as it assesses its program and plans for the future

B. Evaluate community partnerships

Evaluate community partnerships to understand the organization's ability to collaborate and drive greater change:

- Organization continuously seeks to create partnerships with others serving homeless and at-risk youth to cover gaps in services and create a sense of community for homeless youth
- Organization participates in boards, committees, and professional organizations to exchange information about what works with peer organizations and advocate for and create a comprehensive public policy agenda to address the issue of youth homelessness

C. Evaluate field-building activities

Evaluate field-building activities to understand an organization's role in driving system change:

- Organization shares lessons learned and best practices with others actively working in the field by conducting research on its own programs and making data publicly available
- Organization regularly advocates for systemic and policy changes to support homeless youth

STEP 5 Interpret your Evaluation and Determine How to Provide Support

The preceding four steps helped you gain a holistic understanding of an organization and its youth homelessness programs. To make a decision about the best way to provide support, determine where your organization fits among the following three categories.

- A. High-performing organizations** meet the majority of the criteria outlined above
- B. Developing organizations** meet some, but not all, of the criteria outlined above
- C. Low-performing organizations** meet few to none of the criteria outlined above

A. High-performing organizations

These organizations are running youth homelessness programs that focus on providing youth with a set of services tailored to their particular needs and helping youth build the skills and social supports they need to become self-sufficient adults. These organizations are financially sound with excellent leadership and governance. Donors can feel confident that an investment in such an organization will be used effectively.

Risk / Reward	Low risk/high reward
Recommended level of involvement	Low
Examples of investment opportunities	Support research to provide evidence of what works and build the field, donate furniture or other supplies to help furnish youth apartments in a transitional housing program, provide funding to train other organizations, support implementation of growth plans

B. Developing organizations

These organizations may be doing some things well but need improvement in other areas. Often these are young organizations, but they can also be established organizations that are undergoing a transition. Investment in these organizations can be challenging yet exciting for donors who are interested in helping them improve.

Risk / Reward	Moderate risk/high reward
Recommended level of involvement	Medium to high
Examples of investment opportunities	Support research on program effectiveness, pilot improved program models, expand effective services, recruit staff experienced in working with homeless youth

C. Low-performing organizations

These organizations have room for improvement in all areas. Investment in a low-performing organization with a good management team that is dedicated to improving its programs can be an exciting opportunity for donors who want to support organizational development. Investment in low-performing organizations that are not dedicated to improving is not recommended.

Risk / Reward	High risk/reward varies based on organization's desire to improve
Recommended level of involvement	High, if the organization is strategically working to improve
Examples of investment opportunities	Support strategic or business planning, support research to determine needs of local homeless youth population, secure technical assistance to improve programs, hire staff with significant expertise, help connect the organization with strong partners

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Rediscovery, Inc.
WALTHAM, MA

Tempo Young Adult Resource Center
FRAMINGHAM, MA

Urban Peak
DENVER, CO

Supporting Emerging Social Innovations

HIGH RISK WITH THE POTENTIAL FOR HIGH REWARD

Donors may also wish to consider organizations that are testing innovative approaches that could eventually lead to breakthroughs in addressing the targeted social issues. Such organizations should be able to articulate why they are diverging from the proven approach and how they see themselves improving upon that approach.

Testing new models for family reconciliation is one example of needed innovation in the youth homelessness sector. Experts agree that family reconciliation is important—data shows that most homeless youth return home, whether or not their home situations are healthy. Therefore, it is important that programs are able to help youth and their families create a more positive home environment. This will prevent youth from becoming homeless multiple times. Limited early evidence exists about effective methodologies for family reconciliation, but more data and research are needed about the best tools for this path.

Social Impact Research (SIR) is the independent research department of Root Cause, a research and consulting firm dedicated to mobilizing the nonprofit, public, and business sectors to work collaboratively in a new social impact market. Modeled after private sector equity research firms, SIR conducts research on social issues and independent analysis of program performance to provide leaders and funders with the rigorous, actionable information they need to make strategic decisions about creating and investing in social impact.



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