

January 2016

Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project



visible child initiative
children • family • community
a program of the family housing fund

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Visible Child Initiative Background.....	4
Homeless Adolescent Parent Project Background.....	5
Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project Methodology	6
Project Limitations	6
Service Provider Experiences	7
Service Demographics	7
Service Provider Goals	7
Educational Attainment and Employment	7
Positive Parenting Practices	8
Perceived Needs of Adolescent Parents and their Young Children.....	9
Safety/Stability.....	9
Housing.....	10
Mental Health and Trauma	11
Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and Childcare.....	11
Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project Focus Groups.....	12
Participant Demographics & Experience with Homelessness	12
Goals for the Future.....	13
Definition of Homelessness.....	13
Impact of Homelessness.....	13
Adolescent Parent Perception: How Homelessness Affects Me.....	13
Adolescent Parent Perception: How Homelessness Affects My Child/Children.....	14
Increased stress	14
Greater Expectations of Children.....	14
No Impact.....	15
Barriers to Accessing Services	15
Housing.....	15
Childcare.....	16
Employment.....	16
Medical Care.....	17
General Support Services.....	17
Suggestions for Support Services.....	17
Childcare.....	17
Fatherhood	17
Shelter	17
Transportation	18
Support Services	18
Education	18
Priorities to Improve Support to Homeless Adolescent Parents	18

Staff Development	19
Priorities	19
Housing	19
Priorities	19
Systems Improvement	20
Priorities	20
Acknowledgements	20
APPENDIX A: Logic Model	21
APPENDIX B: Homeless Adolescent Parent Service Provider Chart	22

Executive Summary

During the Wilder Research triennial Statewide Homeless Survey in 2012, researchers interviewed 207 homeless young parents (age 21 or younger), who accounted for 29 percent of all homeless youth in Minnesota. This population of homeless youth is often unable to access resources because they are too young to meet the requirements for services intended for homeless families, and, at the same time, they are ineligible for services for homeless youth because they have their own children. The unintended consequences of well-intentioned policy had left this highly vulnerable group to fend for themselves at a time when the cognitive skills of young parents have not fully matured. The Family Housing Fund's Visible Child Initiative committed to a discovery process to understand the needs and status of homeless adolescent parents and their children.

Through a series of interviews with 15 service providers and two focus groups with homeless or formerly homeless adolescent parents safety, stability, education, and employment were identified as key goals goal for homeless young parents. However, both groups noted that age and childcare challenges often stand in the way of achieving young parents' goals, despite the mainstream resources that are supposed to support them. Housing was discussed by both groups as one component of stability, and it was noted that shelter and supportive housing is not designed for and often will not accept parenting youth, especially youth that are under age 18.

Based on the discovery project the Family Housing Fund's Visible Child Initiative supports Minnesota's *Heading Home 2016-2017* plan to prevent and end homelessness. Specifically related to homeless adolescent parents, the Visible Child Initiative recommends developing support of front line staff working with homeless parenting youth and their children, increase housing opportunities for parent youth who are under age 16, and increasing the connection between and ease of access for mainstream support services.

Visible Child Initiative Background

In 2005, the Family Housing Fund partnered with clinical psychologist and University of Minnesota researcher Dr. Abigail Gewirtz on a needs assessment of 450 children living in Twin Cities supportive housing. The assessment revealed that risk factors for poor developmental, behavioral, and social outcomes among these children significantly escalated with age. The assessment also identified a surprising lack of data on the needs of young children – newborn to 4 years old – who have experienced homelessness.

Having identified a gap in the tools needed for the supportive housing system to fully meet the needs of families, the Family Housing Fund (FHFund) launched the Visible Child Initiative as an effort to join research with strategic practice, public policy, and community support to elevate the needs of children who have experienced the traumas of homelessness.

For the past 10 years, the Family Housing Fund's multi-faceted Visible Child Initiative's has worked to end homelessness by elevating an understanding of the needs and status of children who have known homelessness in order to invest in their healthy development and academic success. The Visible Child Initiative works with supportive housing providers to leverage community resources to lessen the traumatic effects of homelessness and invest in children's healthy development.

The Visible Child Initiative ensures that support service staff in shelter and supportive housing has the best evidence-based research knowledge and tools available to support the social and emotional needs of children and influence positive parenting practices by offering regular training; recommending policy, process, and practice; and testing promising solutions and sharing the results. Through its family-centered approach, the Visible Child Initiative mitigates the potential for generational homelessness that happens when homeless children grow up to head our community's future families.

Homeless Adolescent Parent Project Background

During the Wilder Research triennial Statewide Homeless Survey in 2012,¹ researchers interviewed 207 homeless young parents (age 21 or younger), who accounted for 29 percent of all homeless youth² in Minnesota. The majority of the young parents (72%) were homeless with their children, more than three-quarters of whom (76%) were children under age three.

For young parents whose children are homeless with them, 13 percent reported that their children have emotional or behavioral problems, and nine percent said their children have chronic or severe physical problems that interfere with their daily activities. Compounding these challenges, seven percent of the young homeless parents reported that they have been unable to obtain needed health care or dental care for their children. Thirteen percent reported that their children have had to skip meals because they lack money to buy food. Just under half of the young parents (46%) said they have been unable to find childcare when they have needed it.

This incredible need matched the feedback that the Family Housing Fund's Visible Child Initiative was hearing from supportive housing providers. This population of homeless youth is often unable to access resources because they are too young to meet the requirements for services intended for homeless families, and, at the same time, they are ineligible for services for homeless youth because they have their own children. The unintended consequences of well-intentioned policy had left this highly vulnerable group to fend for themselves at a time when the cognitive skills of young parents have not fully matured.

The understanding that “the sense of self that develops and is then transferred from parent to child is shaped by the life experiences of generations,”³ and drove the Visible Child Initiative's original Infant and Toddler Discovery Project, is even more insightful as the Initiative seeks to help the housing and service system meet the needs of homeless adolescent parents. Youth who have not yet reached their own cognitive maturity are responsible for the healthy development of their own children under extremely stressful and traumatic conditions.

The mission of the Family Housing Fund is to support the affordable housing network meet the needs of families in complex and changing conditions. Recognizing the gap in our collective

¹ Wilder Research. (April 2013). Homeless youth in Minnesota. http://www.wilder.org/Wilder-Research/Publications/HomelessStudyTables2012/StatewideMNyouth2012age_Tables127-150.pdf.

² The term “Youth” combines data on unaccompanied minors (age 17 and under) and young adults (ages 18 to through 21) to describe all persons 21 and under who are on their own.

³ Norton, D.G. (April 1990). Zero to Three Bulletin of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs. Vol. X, No. 4. University of Chicago.

ability to serve homeless parenting youth, the Family Housing Fund's Visible Child Initiative committed to a discovery process to understand the needs and status of homeless adolescent parents. With the hope that this work will eventually lead to system improvements that support homeless adolescent parents, the Family Housing Fund gets one step closer to achieving its vision that all families will have a home they can afford and a place from which they can prosper and contribute to the larger community.

Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project Methodology

The Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project collected data from two sources: (1) staff of youth serving human and social service organizations and (2) homeless adolescent parents themselves. Visible Child Initiative staff established the questions for each group and facilitated the conversations with the support of research consultants. Staff of youth serving organizations were interviewed individually, and later gathered as a group to review project findings. Homeless adolescent parents' feedback was gathered during two focus groups.

Like the Visible Child Initiative Infant and Toddler Discovery Project that came before it, the Homeless Adolescent Parent Project research process was based on the participatory action model of research, which uses a collaborative approach to examine practical problems with the goal of affecting policy and practice. The process was guided by four basic tenets:

- Staff understanding of the lives of homeless adolescent parents is essential in developing a process to engage parents successfully.
- The research design must approach young parents as experts on their family strengths and their needs and those of their young children.
- The research process could not create a burden for front line staff.
- Key staff at all participating sites must be knowledgeable about the purpose of the project and the benefits of participating in the project to their organization, themselves, and their clients. The process began with interviews of 15 youth service providers, and concluded in September 2015 with focus groups of homeless adolescent parents at two sites, one long-term shelter and one drop-in homeless center. By conducting this research, the Visible Child Initiative set out to learn more about service landscape and the experiences of young parents without a permanent place to live.

Project Limitations

Participation by staff and youth in this project was voluntary. Those who did not participate may have different characteristics and opinions than those who volunteered. This report does not draw conclusions on the frequency of responses due to the small sample size. This document reports on the aggregated responses with the intent of using this information to make recommendations for action to support homeless adolescent parents and the organizations that serve them.

Service Provider Experiences

This section describes the interviews the Visible Child Initiative conducted with leadership from 15 Twin Cities service providers who serve homeless youth, including a city-county partnership, representatives from two health care providers, and one state representative (see APPENDIX B: Homeless Adolescent Parent Service Provider Chart). Participation in interviews was voluntary and interviewees had the opportunity to suggest others that should be include in this project.

Service Demographics

Service providers were first asked how they describe and/or define the term *adolescent*. Staff that participated in interviews typically worked for organizations that focused services for adolescents age 18-21. While the Visible Child Initiative is focused on the needs of *all* homeless young parents, including those under age 18, the responses from service providers during the interviews tended to center on clients ages 18-21. The Visible Child Initiative was unable to find a larger sample of service organizations that served homeless, parenting, unaccompanied youth under 18. The Visible Child Initiative believes much of what was learned through the interviews can be expanded to apply to the needs of adolescent parents under 18 years and their children. Nevertheless, there may be specific needs of younger homeless adolescent parents and their children that have not been identified through this process, such as issues of emancipation and access to medical care/prescriptions.

Service Provider Goals

Participating organizations all had different goals for their work with adolescents. As with target age of clients, the goal of the organization's work is a determining factor to the approach and services provided to youth. Understanding what goals the community of service organizations are working towards, and the approaches they use is critical to making recommendations to improve support to homeless adolescent parents without duplication. The goal of the Homeless Adolescent Parent Project is to identify and fill gaps for these vulnerable families.

Educational Attainment and Employment

Organizations simultaneously spoke of employment and education. Responses from interviews indicate the primary goal of organizations is to increase education attainment of their clients, with the understanding that educational attainment is directly tied to successful employment outcomes. Over 70% of the organizations interviewed identified educational attainments as their primary outcome. Program efforts tended to focused on getting youth back into school to earn a GED or high school diploma, working to resolve debt from a "predatory" school financial aid lender, and entrance into a certificate or post-secondary degree program to improve earning potential.

Barriers Impeding Education Attainment and Employment

Service providers found it challenging to keep unaccompanied youth in school and to enroll young adults (age 18 or older) in school. If youth are also parenting, there are additional challenges. The McKinney-Vento Act, which guarantees transportation to school for homeless youth does not provide for transportation to childcare. Unless childcare is located within the school, the transportation services provided by the McKinney-Vento Act do not help young parents overcome barrier to completing school. Service providers also reported that public high schools did not want to enroll older teens that are behind in credits. Further impeding access to school, homeless adolescent parents may also suffer from mental health issues, such as trauma, PTSD, and undiagnosed learning disabilities. Access to housing, childcare, and transportation also played a role in preventing a teen parent from continuing education.

Positive Parenting Practices

During interviews, providers spoke about working with adolescents who have experienced significant trauma and in many cases do not have a healthy parenting model. Over 50% of providers commented on the need for or their desire to support healthy parenting practices for both young mothers and fathers; nevertheless, providers expressed their struggle with how to teach and/or integrate parenting into service delivery.

Serving Adolescent Fathers

A critical finding from the interview process was that 40 percent of the providers identified the need to address challenges specific to adolescent fathers. Providers spoke of the lack of services targeted to or even accessible for adolescent male parents, including the lack of housing options for adolescent males who are primary caregiver of their young child, and that public programs promote the mother as sole or primary caretaker.

“The onus is on the mom to get on all the programs. Dad’s in Minnesota rarely qualify for any.” - Interview with Oasis for Youth

Delaying Subsequent Childbearing

Organizations whose primary mission was public health identified delaying subsequent childbearing by adolescent parents as a priority for the community. These organizations state that when they offer training on this topic, the sessions will always fill up. However, interview responses from direct service organizations suggest that delaying subsequent childbearing is not a priority for their work with youth. Addressing relationship volatility within youth’s romantic relationships is often a higher priority. This challenge is closely tied with childbearing as some teens use childbearing to control or maintain a relationship that is unhealthy and volatile. Overall, direct service providers are focused on the immediate needs and crises of adolescent parents, and strategies to promote delaying subsequent childbearing do not integrate easily with emergency food

and shelter or high school/technical education missions.

Perceived Needs of Adolescent Parents and their Young Children

This section of the interviews with service providers was designed to improve the Visible Child Initiative's understanding of how organizations identify the needs of adolescent parents and their young children, and the challenges that affect their ability to provide services that meet their clients' needs. When asked how their organization identifies the needs of adolescent parents and their young children, most providers reported that they let the youth determine how they define success, rather than imposing an institutional or cultural standard of success. In practice, responses show service providers' primary focuses when working with homeless adolescent youth are safety/stability, housing/shelter, and education/employment; however, these focuses were complicated challenges in mental health, trauma, and childcare.

Safety/Stability

Unfortunately, abuse is one of the primary reasons adolescents become homeless; other reasons include aging out of the foster care system and economic hardship.⁴ Service providers identified the physical safety and social stability of homeless adolescent parents as a major concern in their work; lack of safety and stability can prevent young parents from meeting their goals. Even after an adolescent parent has fled an abusive home environment, the youth and their children remain at high risk of abuse and exploitation. The Department of Human Services stressed during their interview that the amount of time adolescent parents remain in an unsafe environment matters; each year they and their children are not safe, the risks increase. Homeless youth are targets for sexual assault and sexual exploitation. Providers referenced landlords exploiting youth for rent and youth being sold by family member or friend. Even if an adolescent parent feels safe, for example when couch-hopping, the sheer number of people they encounter put them and their children at risk of assault. The concerns for safety and stability arise from the interconnected issues of housing, access to services, and risk for abuse and exploitation. Responses from the interviewees highlight this complex concern, and the following sections further expand on the unique needs in housing, mental health, and childcare.

Receiving Benefits

According to the Minnesota Visiting Nurses Association, un-emancipated youth (under age 18) may require benefits from public assistance to be distributed to a payee. In some cases, the payee is not a safe option for young parents—they cannot ask for or never receive their benefits. Young pregnant females will often move in with their boyfriend's parents, and his parents will become the payee. Sometimes this arrangement is safe for the adolescent, but it also opens the door to potential unintended back-to-back pregnancies.

⁴ National Coalition for the Homeless. (February 2012). Homeless Youth. <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/youth.html>

Medical Care

According to The Bridge for Youth, homeless adolescents do not regularly have access to quality medical care and prescription medications. It can be very hard to get homeless youth their medication and or to an ER without their parents or legal caregiver finding out through insurance claims. This is dangerous for youth if they fled an abusive situation or are trying to keep a sexual assault private.

Parenting and Childcare

Teen moms are under the microscope. They can do something that another parent would also do, and still lose their child to the county child protective services because of it. Child protection issues in cases that involve homeless adolescent parents are extremely complex because public agencies are dealing with two children, one who is the parent and their young child.

Housing

Access to housing and shelter is a significant barrier to success for homeless adolescents with and without children. Youth service providers recognize the importance of stable, affordable housing for youth to pursue their personal goals, education, or employment. Two of the service providers explained that youth often do not consider themselves homeless. If they are “couch hopping” or staying with a friend who lives with their parents, they do not see themselves as homeless, even though they are by most public program definitions.

Housing for youth 18 and older is difficult to find, but housing resources are increasing. Housing for unaccompanied youth younger than 18 is severely limited, and housing for parenting youth under 18 is nearly impossible to find. Five out of the 15 organizations interviewed provide housing or shelter options for adolescent parents age 16 and younger and their children. This represents a very small number of housing units.

Forty percent of service providers reported that housing instability posed a significant threat to the education of homeless adolescent parents. The Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program is one of the largest resources nationally for communities to supply affordable housing. However, one of the program rules prohibits individuals who would otherwise qualify to live in units constructed with LIHTC funds from renting the unit if they are enrolled in school full time. The rule was established to prevent (primarily college) students who often have access to other support from scholarships, grants, and family to rent units intended to offer housing stability for low-income households, but the rule has had unintended consequences for homeless adolescents. Despite advocating for a change to the so called “student rule” to allow full-time students who experience or have recently experienced homelessness to be eligible to rent LIHTC housing units, the rule has persisted to present a challenge for homeless adolescent parents and the organizations that support them to achieve education goals.

In addition to the lack of housing opportunities for homeless adolescent parents, service providers

identified a number of other challenges related to housing:

- The shelter system is not designed to respond to developmental needs of adolescent parents or young children.
- If an adolescent becomes pregnant or gives birth while living in housing for unaccompanied homeless youth, she is required to leave.
- Shelters are not always designed for families who want to co-parent.
- The housing barriers common for homeless adults are also present for homeless adolescents:
 - Housing/rental cost: Even if an apartment becomes available, the price is too high.
 - Previous eviction notices can prevent a young parent from being able to rent again.

Mental Health and Trauma

The mental health of adolescents experiencing homelessness was a clear priority for service providers. Eighty percent (12 of 15) providers identified trauma as a concern in their work with adolescents. Three organizations—Teens Alone, YouthLink, and Face 2 Face—provide on-site access to mental health services for adolescents. A key component of the Visible Child Initiative is to spread the use of trauma informed practices and tools among front line staff in shelter and supportive housing. The Family Housing Fund was pleased to learn that comments from interviewees suggested awareness of the traumas experienced by homeless youth, and general understanding that parent trauma can affect child wellbeing. In line with service providers’ organizational goals to support healthy parenting, providers expressed a desire to increase their capacity to use trauma informed practices that promote the health and wellbeing of parents and children.

Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and Childcare

In 13 of 15 interviews with providers, concern over the homeless parents’ ability to access childcare and utilize MFIP was raised. MFIP is designed to “help families meet their basic needs, while helping parents move to financial stability through work.”⁵ Families are eligible for cash, food, and childcare assistance through this program. The significant rules, regulations, and requirements of MFIP are difficult for many families to track, follow, and maintain; these challenges are intensified for adolescent parents who have not fully matured cognitively. Providers reported that the rules of MFIP are disempowering for adolescents. For example, the limit on earning discourages work—if an adolescent earns over a certain amount, their MFIP grant is decreased.

⁵ Minnesota Department of Human Services. (January 2015). Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=id_004112

System wide, the perception of providers was that there is a lack of childcare funding and there are limited quality childcare options, including providers who can work effectively with adolescent parents *and* their children who have experience toxic or traumatic stress. Given the risks of toxic and traumatic stress, interviewees noted the importance of finding providers that can address the dual development needs of the adolescent parent and their children. There is a thirty-day wait to be approved for childcare assistance through MFIP once a parent has a job; this can interfere with the adolescent parent securing a job because employers will not hold the position. Furthermore, if an adolescent loses a job, they go to the bottom of the childcare waiting list. Depending on their employment or educational goals, adolescent parents may also need to find 24-hour care for their children. Access to childcare near employment, housing, and school is critical to supporting the success of adolescent parents.

Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project Focus Groups

The focus groups gathered information about how young parents define homelessness, their barriers to getting and keeping housing and other support services, and their goals for the future. Participants in the focus groups also completed a brief survey to provide explicit information about their histories of homelessness. The Family Housing Fund provided a small stipend to Oasis for Youth and LifeHaven who recruited focus group participants and provided meeting logistics. The Visible Child Initiative provided participants with childcare and a meal during the group, along with a financial incentive of \$20 following the group’s completion.

Participant Demographics & Experience with Homelessness

Fourteen youth parents participated in the two focus groups. Thirteen participants were mothers, and one was a father. Ages of participants ranged from 15 to 22 years old. At the time of the focus groups, three participants were pregnant, nine had one child, and three had two children. The children ranged in age from three months to five years, with an average age of two years. All focus group participants were youth of color.

At the time of the focus group, some of the participants reported being homeless, while others had been homeless in the past. None of the formerly homeless participants lived in subsidized housing. Over one-third of the participants (38%) experienced homelessness with their parents before experiencing it on their own. The age that participants reported first experiencing homelessness with

Figure 1: Focus Group Experience with Homelessness

Length of Most Recent Experience with Homelessness	Percentage of Respondents
Less than one month	0%
At least 1 month to less than 4 months	23%
At least 4 months but less than 7 months	15%
At least 7 months but less than 12 months	8%
At least 1 year but less than 3 years	46%
At least 3 years but less than 5 years	0%
5 years or longer	8%

or without their parents ranged from one to 19 years, with an average age of 14 years. The age that participants reported first experiencing homelessness without their parents ranged from 14 to 19 years, with an average age of 17 years. During their most recent experience of homelessness, nearly half of participants (46%) had been homeless for less than one year and nearly half (46%) had been homeless between one and 3 years (Figure 1). Based on their duration of homelessness and the ages of their children, most participating parents (77%) had at least one child before their most recent experience with homelessness, and over half (54%) have birthed or will birth a child while homeless.

Goals for the Future

When asked where they would like to be in three years, focus group participants mentioned:

- Securing stable housing
- Completing their high school or college education
- Watching their child achieve developmental milestones
- Finding a romantic partner
- Moving out of Minnesota
- Experiencing less stress, struggle, or fear
- Establishing a career (e.g., National Guard, criminal justice, or opening a shelter)

Definition of Homelessness

Participants defined homelessness as having nowhere to go or stay. Respondents mentioned that homelessness can include sleeping outside or in parks, staying with friends or in a shelter, or spending time riding public transportation. One respondent mentioned experiencing police harassment for being homeless and another mentioned a general feeling of being “unwanted.”

During the focus groups, homeless teen parents defined homelessness as *having no where to go or stay.*

Impact of Homelessness

Focus group moderators asked participants how homelessness affects them as young parents, and how it affects their children. The responses below represent the majority response, unless otherwise noted.

Adolescent Parent Perception: How Homelessness Affects Me

Emotional Health

Young parents described the effects that their homelessness has on their mental health, including feelings of stress, anxiety, and/or depression. Some respondents shared that they want to protect their children from these stressors or feelings, so they try not to show when they are upset. One mother reported that she makes sure her child does not see her cry.

Judgment from Others

A few respondents shared experiences in which they felt judged because they were homeless young parents. Sometimes, people assume that they have a mental illness, they are unfit parents, or they are not working hard enough to avoid homelessness. This judgement negatively affects the young parents' emotional health.

Experiences with Child Protection

The involvement of county child protection services in some respondents' lives causes an additional level of stress. Some of the participating young parents had been involved with child protection since the birth of their child/children.

Lack of Structure and Stability

Respondents reported a lack of structure and stability associated with homelessness and moving from place to place. This lack of structure and stability provokes stress about the future and not knowing what is going to happen.

Lack of Supervision

Several respondents felt that being homeless meant that they had no supervision and that no one had an investment in what happened to them. In some cases, respondents shared that their pregnancies were due, in part, to this lack of supervision. A couple of respondents commented that their parents' struggles contributed to their homelessness and stress.

Education Challenges

The general lack of structure and stability, as well as difficulty accessing reliable, affordable childcare makes it difficult for many respondents to attend school. Respondents reported that they were motivated to stay in school, so they found ways to be resourceful, such as bringing their child to school and completing work outside of traditional classrooms. Some young parents reported that school provided a sense of stability and routine they otherwise would not have had.

Adolescent Parent Perception: How Homelessness Affects My Child/Children

Increased stress

In addition to feeling their own stress, respondents feel that their children have experienced increased stress from the constant change and unfamiliar living environments because of homelessness.

Greater Expectations of Children

A couple of respondents shared that they tend to expect their children to act older or take on more responsibility than they should developmentally. Even though the oldest child of the parents participating was only five years old, in some cases, the parents rely on their

children to help.

No Impact

While research has well documented the effect of homelessness, high mobility, and toxic stress on children, as summarized in the Family Housing Fund's *Children Pay the Price for Homelessness* Fact Sheet⁶ and University of Minnesota's report *Part C Services and Homeless/Highly Mobile Children*,⁷ some focus group participants did not feel that being homeless affects their children.

Barriers to Accessing Services

The adolescent parents that participated in the focus groups identified barriers to accessing essential services and services that could help them meet their goals.

Housing

Research and the experience of funders, developers, owners, and residents have documented the challenges to supplying adequate affordable housing nationally⁸ and globally.⁹ These challenges, in turn affect an individual's ability to rent an affordable and safe home. While tenant screening plays an important role in creating a safe community and is a tool for an owner to run a successful business, HousingLink has also noted tenant-screening policies have created a "new class that is unable to access rental housing."¹⁰ Age, socio-economic status, and experiences create a specific set of challenges for homeless adolescent parents to overcome in order to rent a home.

Because someone under the age of 18 cannot legally enter into a contract, homeless adolescent parents' young age is one of the first challenges that they must overcome, particularly if the youth are not emancipated, which is a difficult process in Minnesota. Tied to their young age,

⁶ Fact Sheet available at http://www.fhfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Children_Pay_the_Price_2014.pdf and printed copies available upon request.

⁷ The University of Minnesota report by Kevin Overson and Scott McConnell is available through the Visible Child Initiative website, at <http://www.visiblechild.org/part-c-services-and-homelesshighly-mobile-children/>.

⁸ Chiarenza, G. (Spring 2013). Challenges for Affordable Housing in a New Era of Scarcity. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. http://www.frbsf.org/community-development/files/Chiarenza_CISP13.pdf

⁹ Woetzel, J., et al. (October 2014). A blueprint for addressing the global affordable housing challenge. McKinsey & Company. http://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/dotcom/insights%20and%20pubs/mgi/research/urbanization/a%20blueprint%20for%20addressing%20the%20global%20affordable%20housing%20challenge/mgi_affordable_housing_full%20report_october%202014.ashx

¹⁰ HousingLink. (Summer 2004). Tenant screening agencies in the Twin Cities: An overview of tenant screening practices and their impact on renters. http://www.housinglink.org/Files/Tenant_Screening.pdf

their lack of rental history and credit create further barriers for homeless adolescent parents securing affordable, safe housing. Additionally, any criminal background is may disqualify youth during the tenant screening process.

Affordable housing is out of reach for many working families,¹¹ and homeless adolescent parents are no exception. Young parents reported having difficulty getting and keeping a job as a contributing factor to their inability to secure housing. Furthermore, youth participating in the focus groups reported difficulty in balancing expenses for housing with other needs. Because of the high cost of housing, the focus group participants reported settling for substandard or unsafe housing.

Safe Shelter

While stable permanent housing is the goal for homeless youth, temporary shelter is often an intermediate step between homelessness and permanent housing. During the focus groups, young parents described difficulty accessing safe and clean shelters. Respondents do not feel that the fees charged by many shelters were justified given the poor conditions. Additionally, finding shelters that accept adolescent pregnant women or families proved difficult for respondents from certain counties. For example, Hennepin County guarantees shelter for homeless individuals and families (ages 18 and older), while Ramsey County does not. Challenges faced by respondents from Hennepin County pertained more to the quality and safety of the shelters, than the concern over access in Ramsey County.

Childcare

Focus group participants reported having trouble in accessing childcare. Childcare can be expensive and inaccessible even for traditional, housed, and working families. Respondents described the seemingly impossible cycle of needing a job to afford childcare, but needing childcare to find a job. While subsidies are available, many respondents pointed to long wait lists as a major barrier to the service. In addition to employment challenges, a lack of childcare often prevents some young parents from achieving their educational goals, such as graduating high school. A couple of respondents have sent their children to live with extended family out-of-state because they could not access childcare in Minnesota.

Employment

Respondents described difficulty in securing employment, especially safe employment that pays a livable wage. Respondents mentioned the need to settle for unsafe or undesirable employment situations, such as jobs they hate, low paying jobs, or jobs in the sex trade (e.g., stripping or prostitution), in order to pay bills. Several young parents discussed the difficulty of keeping

¹¹ Family Housing Fund. (July 2015). Working Doesn't Always Pay for a Home. http://www.fhfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Working-Doesnt-Pay-for-Home_HT_July-2015.pdf

employment due to the lack of housing stability and the need to balance program requirements, school, work, parenting, and finding shelter or food each day.

Medical Care

Validating the concerns of service providers, some focus group respondents struggled to access reliable health care. Respondents noted the particular challenge of access health care after they turn 18, at which point the requirements for service change.

General Support Services

Several respondents described barriers to accessing support services in general during the focus group. One significant barrier to access is program restrictions, including conflicting requirements between programs, such as attendance requirements, curfews, or costs that are not compatible across programs. In addition, respondents noted many challenging steps to take to access the services. Again echoing concerns of service providers, the youth participants noted that some programs contact youth's parents, which can be a deterrent.

Suggestions for Support Services

Facilitators asked focus group participants to share their suggestions for program improvements and their wishes for support services. The following themes emerged:

Childcare

Respondents agreed that affordable or free childcare would significantly improve their ability to achieve stability in other areas of their lives. A couple of respondents shared that ending sliding scales, which require parents to pay more when they work and erodes some of the benefit of their employment, would remove the disincentive to work.

Fatherhood

Participants shared that they would like their children's fathers to be more involved in their lives, and would like support to facilitate that. In some cases, this includes making it easier for both parents to access support services together; in other cases, it includes education for fathers to motivate them and teach them how to be involved with their children. Some respondents requested help accessing child support from their children's fathers.

Shelter

Several respondents said they would like the community to have safe, clean, temporary shelters that are free to use. The fees currently in place at many shelters make it difficult for young parents to save money for a rent deposit or to buy basic necessities, such as diapers. If shelters do charge a fee, then the respondents want to know how the money is used to make the space more comfortable or sanitary.

Housing

No respondents volunteered suggestions specifically related to permanent affordable housing. However, several participants said they feel the need to "hustle" to be able to

pay for housing. In addition, those who had housing at the time of the focus group spent an estimated 70 percent of their income on housing. Housing is considered affordable if a household spends less than 30 percent of their income on housing related expenses. The amount young parents who have experienced homelessness are paying for housing, as a percent of their total income, has a significant negative effect on their ability to afford other necessities.

Transportation

Participants desire access to more reliable transportation. Some respondents shared that support programs often impose a limit on the number of bus tokens a client can receive. Additionally, there are places young parents need to visit or places of employment that are very difficult to reach by public transit, especially in bad weather conditions. Transportation can be particularly challenging when respondents must travel to multiple locations throughout the day to fulfill program requirements.

Support Services

Respondents asked for programs that are more welcoming, meaning staff are less judgmental and services are easier to access with fewer restrictions, clearer requirements, shorter wait lists, and more centralized coordination or integration of services. Several respondents noted their personal need for additional support accessing basic needs, such as food and formula, clothing, and diapers during the focus groups.

Education

A couple of respondents stated that they would like access to free post-secondary education.

Priorities to Improve Support to Homeless Adolescent Parents

As a housing intermediary, the Family Housing Fund has been a partner in Minnesota's statewide *Heading Home* plan to prevent and end homelessness, first published in 2013. Despite progress towards preventing and ending homelessness, more than 7,500 Minnesotans are homeless on any night, most are children and with parents. The Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project has highlighted a particularly vulnerable sub-group of families and the challenges they face to achieving housing stability.

In January 2016, the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness adopted the updated *Heading Home: Minnesota's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*,¹² which includes the goal of ending homelessness among parenting youth in 2017 as a step towards preventing and ending homelessness among families in 2020. The Family Housing Fund supports this work, and

¹² *Heading Home: Minnesota's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness 2016-2017* is available at http://www.headinghomeminnesota.org/sites/default/files/MHFA_FULLPLAN.pdf.

identified priorities within the areas of frontline staff support, housing, and systems change that will advance the goals outlined within *Heading Home* by responding to the needs of homeless parenting youth through the Visible Child Initiative's Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project.

Staff Development

Through the Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project interviews, housing and service providers identified their need for support in serving parenting adolescents who have experienced significant trauma and, in many cases, do not have a healthy parenting model. Staff development is at the core of the Visible Child Initiative; the Visible Child Initiative helps the supportive housing network meet the needs of families by ensuring that staff have access to trauma informed, evidence based tools and strategies at no cost to the service organizations. Therefore, staff development is central to the way the Visible Child Initiative plans to support the 2016-2017 *Heading Home* plan.

Priorities

- Leverage community expertise, such as Hennepin County Medical Center's Mother Baby Project and University of Minnesota's Harris Institute, to develop and implement strategies to increase the use of evidence-based practices within youth serving organizations to support healthy attachment in the parent-child relationship, promote positive parenting, and improve child developmental outcomes.
- Develop and implement training for youth serving staff on how to provide trauma-informed services and use harm-reduction practices with homeless adolescent parents and their young children.
- Collaborate with homeless youth providers to develop and implement training to improve staff ability to work with multiple systems, including MFIP, childcare, law enforcement, and child protection, which affect homeless adolescent parents and their young children.

Housing

The Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project revealed that young parents recognize the stress that homelessness creates within their life, but do not always understand the connection between their own stress and their children's or the stress that was created for their children by frequent moves and unfamiliar environments. The Discovery Project showed what youth and service providers had known anecdotally: housing or shelter for parenting youth under 18 and their children is nearly impossible to find. The Family Housing Fund's Visible Child Initiative therefore advocates for the following priorities:

Priorities

- Increase shelter options that are appropriate for homeless adolescent parents and their children.

- Increase housing options for homeless adolescent parents ages 16 and younger and their children.
- Address limitations in the tenant eligibility criteria for the LIHTC program to allow homeless or formerly youth to attend school full-time and maintain affordable housing.

Systems Improvement

Within the Homeless Adolescent Parent Discovery Project, both providers and young parents identified mental health and childcare services as critical needs, but the system is not set up to support parents in accessing services. The project identified a disconnect between available services and ability of young parents and their children to access the services. One of the *Heading Home* strategies is to make mainstream resources more accessible, responsive, and impactful. The Visible Child Initiative supports this strategy and specifically plans to:

Priorities

- Advocate for improved cross system collaboration (child welfare, law enforcement, MFIP, and education) in partnership with providers to promote positive parent-child outcomes, improve safety of parents and children, and protect the rights of adolescent parents and their young children.
- Leverage mainstream systems to improve and increase access of developmentally and culturally appropriate mental health services for homeless adolescent parents and their young children.

Acknowledgements

The Family Housing Fund would like to thank Youth Focus Group Participants and staff at

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| • Avenues for Homeless Youth | • Minneapolis/Hennepin County |
| • Beacon House | Office to End Homelessness |
| • Booth Brown Salvation Army | • Oasis for Youth |
| • Bridge for Youth | • Teens Alone |
| • Catholic Charities | • The Link |
| • Face to Face | • YouthLink |
| • LSS - LifeHaven | • Family Tree |
| • DHS Office of Economic Opportunity | • Minnesota Visiting Nurses Association |

for their participation in the Homeless Adolescent Parent Discover Project.

APPENDIX A: Logic Model

Visible Child Initiative: Homeless Adolescent Parent Project (HAPP)

Overall Project Goal: Develop a strategy to meet the needs of homeless adolescent parents and their children to ensure that this particularly vulnerable subset of the homeless family population has access to appropriate services that will help them break the generational cycle of homelessness.

Inputs/Resources	Activities	Measurable Outputs	Measurable Short Term Outcomes/Goals	Community Impact Long Term
<p>Project Coordination</p> <p>Space to convene meetings of homeless teen service providers</p> <p>Consultant services</p>	<p>Identify Organizations to participate in HAPP</p> <p>Hire consultant to work in partnership with HAPP to conduct community scan of the following</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs of homeless adolescent parents and their children. • Current services available for homeless adolescent parents and their children. • Capacity of existing services to meet the needs of homeless adolescents and their children. <p>Use HAPP Assessment to identify service and policy strategies to break the generational cycle of homelessness.</p>	<p>A minimum of 6-12 metro area providers of services to adolescent homeless parents will assist in the design of a needs assessment process, contribute to the needs assessment, assist in the interpretation and analysis of needs assessment data and contribute to HAPP needs assessment final report.</p> <p>The needs assessment process will provide opportunity for homeless adolescent parents to provide input and suggestions for next steps.</p>	<p>The needs assessment will identify capacity needs of service providers to address the physical, mental and emotional health of parents and their children.</p> <p>The HAPP will design a comprehensive plan to address the needs of homeless adolescent parents and their children in the 7 county will be developed based on results of needs assessment.</p> <p>The HAPP will present the results of the needs assessment to the broader community including but not limited to service providers, funders and public officials.</p> <p>The results of the needs assessment will identify needed changes in public policy that will support the health and wellbeing of homeless adolescent parents and their children.</p>	<p>The HAPP will increase the capacity of organizations, communities and state programs to address the needs of homeless adolescent parents and their children.</p>

APPENDIX B: Homeless Adolescent Parent Service Provider Chart

Homeless Youth Organization	Role	Housing			Shelter			Drop In		
		Housing type	Age served	Parent and Child	Shelter	Age Served	Parent and Child	Drop-in	Age Served	Services for Young Children
Avenues for Homeless Youth	Homeless Youth Provider	Short term transitional supportive housing – 18 months or until their 21 st birthday	16-20	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A
Beacon House	Housing Developer/ Owner	10 units of permanent supportive housing - services provided by Simpson Housing	18-24	Yes	Families Moving Forward (60 day limit)	18 and over	Yes	No	N/A	N/A
Booth Brown Salvation Army	Homeless Youth Provider	Transitional Living Program (TLP) and 24-months permanent supportive housing	TLP 16 & 17 years Permanent 18-25 Years	No	Yes (30 day emergency shelter)	18-21	No	No	N/A	N/A
Bridge for Youth	Homeless Youth Provider	No	N/A	N/A	5-day Crisis Shelter - youth can stay more than once a year	10-17	No	Yes	10-17	No
Catholic Charities	Homeless Youth Provider	Transitional housing for males – 28 days Policies and requirements vary from site to site	16-21	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A

Homeless Youth Organization	Role	Housing			Shelter			Drop In		
		Housing type	Age served	Parent and Child	Shelter	Age Served	Parent and Child	Drop-in	Age Served	Services for Young Children
Face to Face	Homeless Youth Provider	Face to Face/Safe Zone transitional living program, 24 months.	17-22	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	SafeZone	14-20	No
LSS/LifeHaven	Homeless Youth Provider	Housing for pregnant/parenting adolescents for up to one year Family Transitional Housing Program - 20 units	16-20 for pregnant/parenting program 18-24 for family program	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A
DHS Office of Economic Opportunity	Public Agency	Funding and policy for homeless youth	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mpls/Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness	Public Agency	Special project – Stable Families Initiative, housing and services for 24 months	18-25 coming from shelter	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A
Oasis for Youth	Homeless Youth Provider	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	16-21	No
Teens Alone	Homeless Youth Provider	Transitional living program for up to 18 months - must be working, and get connected with parenting support	18-24	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	16-21	No

Homeless Youth Organization	Role	Housing			Shelter			Drop In		
		Housing type	Age served	Parent and Child	Shelter	Age Served	Parent and Child	Drop-in	Age Served	Services for Young Children
The Link	Homeless Youth Provider	Rapid Rehousing- RS Eden provides 1 to 2 units, The Link provides services.	16-21 Moms in Mpls	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	N/A
YouthLink	Homeless Youth Provider	4 Transitional Housing units - 24 months	16-22	Yes (only one child)	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	16-23	No
Family Tree	Health Care Provider	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Minnesota Visiting Nurses Association	Health Care Provider	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A