

Community Assessment of Youth in Transition in Columbia, South Carolina

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Summary Report

This report summarizes findings and recommendations of a longer report prepared by the University of South Carolina for United Way of the Midlands.

Introduction

The Youth in Transition Committee is a committee of stakeholders in Richland and Lexington counties convened by United Way of the Midlands (UWM) who are exploring how to serve what appears to be a growing population of “youth in transition” in our community. The project is also designed to increase collaboration across service providers in Columbia in order to better serve youth who are homeless and lack family or other adult support. To inform this work, the University of South Carolina and the United Way of the Midlands worked together to assess youth in transition in Columbia. This report provides information on youth in transition in Columbia; maps available resources for housing, education, and employment support for this population; and highlights effective programs employed in other communities to serve these vulnerable youth.

Definitions

The term “youth in transition” refers to the population of homeless youth, ages 12-24, who are homeless and without a family or guardian and are generally categorized as a runaway youth, throwaway youth, or youth who have aged out of foster care or institutional care (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010a). Runaway youth are those who have left their home or legal residence without the permission of their parents or legal guardians. Throwaway youth are those who have been abandoned by their parents/guardians or have been told to leave the household. If either of these types of youth lacks stable alternative housing, they may be considered homeless (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Youth who are homeless and on their own are also referred to as unaccompanied youth. The term “youth in transition” was chosen to describe unaccompanied youth as many youth in Columbia do not identify with the term unaccompanied youth or homeless youth. Youth in transition can be defined as those youth who are transitioning from unstable living to stable, independent living or those who are transitioning out of some institutional care (i.e., foster care, Department of Juvenile Justice, hospitalization). The term focuses attention on supporting youth to find stable housing and appropriate developmental pathways to adulthood rather than their lack of housing. Although the age range of “youth” is quite broad, the Committee focused on youth ages 16-24.

National Experience

It is difficult to estimate the number of unaccompanied youth because they tend to avoid systems of care and because, frankly, systems of care are designed for adults and do not meet their needs. The National Coalition for the Homeless reports that between 1.5M and 3M youth (under the age of 17) run away or are homeless annually and that between 5% and 7% of American youth become homeless in a given year (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). On any given night, there are approximately 110,000 youth living on the streets, public places, cars, or abandoned buildings, with half of those youth being between the age of 18 and 24 and half between the age of 12 and 17 (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). In 2008-2009, the US Department of Education identified 52,950 unaccompanied youth, 66% of which were living doubled up or staying with friends, 23% were living in shelters, 4% were unsheltered or living on the street, and 6% were staying in hotels or motels. About 29,000 youth age out of the foster care system each year, and approximately 25% of former foster youth experience at least one episode of homelessness after exiting foster care (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). It is important to note many of these statistics are likely underreported given the transient nature of this population.

Lacking a good source of data to estimate unaccompanied youth, demographic information varies. In some communities, the population of unaccompanied youth reflects the general population—in others minorities are overrepresented (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). General estimates have shown that approximately 51.3% are White, 32.3% are Black, 20% are Hispanic, 4.4% are Multiracial, 2.4% are Native American or Alaska Native, .7% are Asian, and .6% are Native Hawaiian (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). In regards to sexual orientation, approximately 20% to 50% of homeless youth identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), depending on where the youth are surveyed, with street youth having the highest percentage of LGBT identification (Ray, 2006). There may be a higher prevalence of LGBT youth who are on the street due to discrimination reported in shelters and other housing programs by both staff and other residents (Hunter, 2008). In regards to gender, estimates similarly vary depending on where the population was sampled (i.e., shelter vs. street). There appears to be more females than males in homeless shelters, but more males on the street compared to females (Toro et al., 2007).

Local Statistics

There is no single source of data locally, so several data sources were reviewed to determine the prevalence of unaccompanied youth in Richland and Lexington counties including, school districts, police departments, Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless' (MACH's) Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and service providers. Data collection is not consistent across sources.

School data

Richland County School Districts identified 248 unaccompanied youth during the 2013-2014 school year—an 80% increase from the previous year. “Youth” includes pre-kindergarten to Adult Education. Some points to note:

- Richland 1 has reported roughly equal numbers of unaccompanied youth in each grade while Richland 2 has primarily reported unaccompanied youth in 9th grade and up.
- Lexington County school districts report substantially fewer unaccompanied youth than the Richland school districts.
- School districts overwhelmingly report more African American youth than any other.
- There are slightly more females being reported than males overall. This may indicate a true difference in the numbers and demographics across districts, or this may indicate a difference in reporting and identification across districts.

Homeless Management Information System/HMIS

Information was also collected from HMIS, which is a local data system that is used to collect client-level data of individuals and families who use homelessness-related services. The data on unaccompanied youth reflect service and shelter information from over 20 providers—only two of whom offer programs designed for the target population. From January 1, 2014 to April 29, 2014, 127 unaccompanied youth between the ages of 17 and 24 were identified in HMIS. The majority of youth were between the ages of 19 and 24, which may be a result of the types of services captured in this dataset. There were slightly more males and females. Approximately 60% of youth were African American. About 43% had not received a diploma or GED, 43% has received a diploma or GED, and 13% had completed some college, post-secondary, or tech certificate at the time of service. It is important to note that some of these numbers may be underreported. For instance, those who are 17 years old may be underreported because, as described below, generally shelters in Columbia do not serve unaccompanied youth below the age of 18.

South Carolina Department of Social Services

The South Carolina Department of Social Services has partnered with the Center for Child and Family Studies at the University of South Carolina to learn more about youth who transition out of foster care. This is part of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), which is the federal data collection that requires all states to survey youth in care at the age of 17 (between October 2010 and September 2011) and requires these same youth to be surveyed again at the age of 19 and 21. For the 2010-2011 survey, 198 17-year-olds who were in foster care completed the survey. Of those 198 youth, 55% were female and 45% were male. In addition, 51% were African American, 44% were Caucasian, and 4% were mixed race. Further, 20% of these youth reported being homeless at some point in their lives. In regards to homelessness, there were twice as many females (14%) as males (7%) who reported experiencing homelessness. In terms of employment, the majority of youth reported that they did not have a full-time or part-time job. In addition, only 26% reported having completed a paid or unpaid apprenticeship, internship, or on-the-job training in the last year. The majority of youth (91%) were currently enrolled and attending high school, GED classes, post high school vocational training, or college. In addition, 75% of youth reported that they had not spent time in jail or other correctional/juvenile detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime.

Columbia Police Department

The Columbia Police Department (CPD) collects information regarding unaccompanied youth as identified as runaways or missing persons. Contacts at the CPD stated that youth are only classified as runaways if they are 16 or under. If they are 17 or older, they are technically classified as a missing person. However, officers sometimes classify outside of these categories. For youth 16 or under in 2013, 211 teens were classified as missing persons and 16 were classified as runaways (total = 227). For year-to-date numbers, at the time data was collected, there were 110 missing persons and 8 runaways in 2014 (total = 118) compared to 123 missing persons and 11 runaways in 2013 (total 134). There appears to be a slight decrease in those identified from 2013 to 2014. For youth aged 17 to 19 in 2013, there were 7 people classified as missing persons and 23 classified as runaways (total = 30). While this number seems substantially lower than youth 16 and under, it may be that youth who are 17 years or older are less likely to be reported to the police if they leave home. When examining the year-to-date numbers, at the time data was collected, there were 4 missing persons and 13 runaways identified in 2014 (total = 17) compared to 14 missing persons and 8 runaways identified in 2013.

Interviews with Providers

Similar to national figures and for similar reasons, there are discrepancies in reported demographics on unaccompanied youth in our community.

Based on limited data source, African American youth seem to generally be overrepresented and Caucasian youth seem to be slightly underrepresented in the population of unaccompanied youth. Richland 1 stated that 94% of unaccompanied youth are African American, and Richland 2 stated that 60% are African American.

In regards to sex, DSS, Richland 1, and Richland 2 reported that there are about 10% more female unaccompanied youth than male unaccompanied youth. According to HMIS, there is about 15% more male unaccompanied youth than female unaccompanied youth. The difference might reflect the types of services that males and females are accessing. In addition, this may demonstrate a sex difference for unaccompanied youth under the age of 18 (DSS and school districts) and unaccompanied youth over the age of 18 (HMIS). In addition, currently all families at St. Lawrence Place in this age range had female head of households, which fits with national data with homeless families typically being headed by females.

Unfortunately, there is not any statistical data in Columbia that states the proportion of unaccompanied youth who identify at LGBT. However, across interviews with service providers, there was a clear discrepancy in perceived numbers of unaccompanied youth who identify as LGBT. About half of the interviewers stated that there were none or very few LGBT unaccompanied youth utilizing their services and about half of the interviews stated that LGBT represent about 20% to 50% of the unaccompanied youth population in Columbia. Thus, it may be that youth are not sharing this information to all service providers. However, we do know that nationally, LGBT youth make up 20% to 50% of unaccompanied youth. It is important to understand that LGBT youth require particular services that may need to be incorporated in current services in Columbia.

Common Reasons for Homelessness

Service providers who were interviewed provided the following comments regarding common reasons for youth in Columbia having experienced a period of unaccompanied homelessness. These reasons included:

- Being kicked out of home (i.e., for identifying as LGBT, belief that 18 year old should be independent).
- Systems issues (i.e., can't get services, no wrap-around services).
- Family issues (i.e., family disagreement, family homelessness, abuse and neglect, disrupted adoptions).
- Risky decision-making (i.e., trouble with school or law, leaving home or system prematurely, issues with drugs and addiction).
- Loss of a parent (so many youth are staying with family members who are not their parents or legal guardians).

Solutions

There are eight recommended strategies for serving youth in transition. Many have common components that support a housing model work for homeless youth. Housing models must offer different levels of housing support and include a range of positive youth development services, life skills development services (i.e., vocational skills, independent living skills, and the promotion of education), and support services (i.e., case management and therapy) (Pope, 2011). These programs are considered "one-stop shops" or "wrap-around services." They provide youth with all the necessary resources within from roof or within one organization. In addition, these programs tend to have a system in which youth progress into independent living. For instance, a youth may enter the agency through the emergency shelter, then may enter on-site transitional housing (semi-independent), and then enter off-site transitional housing, which tends to be more like independent living. Many of the eight strategies listed below are components of a progressive, comprehensive program. Some of these strategies differ by the target population, slight age differences, the specific services offered, and the rules and goals of the program.

1. **Supporting successful transitions to independent living** (Wilkins & Elliot, 2010). This includes having safe, affordable housing available for youth who are aging out of foster care and for youth who are 18 and older and can no longer stay with their family. Additionally, research has shown that youth in transition strongly benefit from independent living skills training. Youth in transition are often coming from dysfunctional environments where it is unlikely that they were exposed to or taught normal day to day skills needed to adequately function in society. Youth entering a transitional program should be assessed on academic and educational levels, employment and vocational skills, personal and social skills, health, residential living and home management skills, personal hygiene and safety, and spending, budgeting, and banking skills. After assessment, individualized treatment plans should be created to build upon the youth's strengths and to teach skills that the youth may be lacking (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, 2007). It is increasingly being recognized that youth between the ages of 18 and 24 are developmentally different from older adults, and thus, should be in programs separate from adults.

2. **Gateway services, such as RHYA (Runaway Homeless Youth Act) street outreach and drop in sites** (Wilkins & Elliot, 2010). Many unaccompanied youth mistrust adults or authority figures due to past experiences, and thus, make them unlikely to seek out services on their own. Street outreach programs are particularly important for engaging with those youth and to build relationships with them so that they are more likely to utilize services being offered. Successful street outreach workers are trained in youth development principles, know how to communicate with young people, and respect their personal space and autonomy. They must also know how to connect youth with services and know the local street culture. This may mean including peers on street outreach teams. Drop-In Centers are also helpful as an initial point of contact for engaging youth in services. These centers should provide immediate needs, such as a shower, laundry, toiletries, food, etc.
3. **Shelters and stabilizing services.** Shelters should emphasize stabilizing youth and reunification with family when able and safe. Young homeless youth are more likely to be reunified with their family. Follow-up after reunification is crucial. It is beneficial to have youth shelters that shelter youth up to age 18 in order to provide a safe alternative to adult shelters and to avoid the possibility of victimization in an adult shelter or by living on the street.
4. **Transitional housing programs or transitional living programs.** These programs are typically for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who cannot be reunited with their family or who are not able to obtain independent housing. These programs often allow youth to stay in the program for 18 to 24 months. The main goal is to help youth make a successful transition to independent living. Living accommodations of these programs include group homes, shared homes, and supervised apartments. Services should at least include case management and life skills training. Life skills training should include employment training, mental and physical health care, home management skills, and benefits assistance. The most effective transitional programs recognize youth as being adults while teaching youth life skills. Typical requirements for remaining in a transitional program include: payment of rent (based on ability to pay), contribution of money to household expenses or savings, attending school or educational program and/or remaining employed, being drug or alcohol free, and meeting house rules (e.g., curfew), participating in program activities, and assisting in housekeeping.
 - Supervised apartments involve a housing model that gives youth the opportunity to practice independent living with guidance and immediate access to assistance if necessary. The apartment buildings are rented or owned by an agency, in which youth live with a live-in supervisor who occupies one of the units. Most program components are voluntary, but residents are encouraged to actively participate (Pope, 2011).
 - Shared houses are houses where youth typically have their own bedroom but share a kitchen and living area. There is at least one staff member who lives on site and provides support to the youth. The youth are responsible for preparing meals and housekeeping. Youth assist in making house rules and are encouraged to make decisions about the house (e.g., decorations, schedules, etc.) (Pope, 2011).

- Community-based group homes are homes where youth share bedrooms and communal living spaces. Many group homes require youth to participate in a structured daily schedule that includes meal times, study times, and recreational activities. Staff do not live on site, but are scheduled in shifts to cover all 24 hours a day. Staff also takes the primary role in cooking and housekeeping (Pope, 2011).
5. **Long-term affordable housing.** The major differences between this and transitional housing is that permanent housing is more flexible, provides longer term support, and has fewer admission criteria. It gives residents the rights and responsibility of tenants. This is typically for youth between the ages of 18 and 25. This housing model is usually considered to be the scattered site model. Scattered-site apartments are privately owned apartments rented by an agency or youth in which youth live independently or with roommates with financial support, training, and some monitoring. The tenant or agency has a lease or occupancy agreement, and there is flexibility with the length of tenancy as long as the youth/agency follows the conditions of the lease/agreement. Many scattered-site apartment programs provide youth with the standard items to set up an apartment and with moving services. Depending on the program, financial assistance can be decreased incrementally in accordance with the progression of the youth's financial ability (Pope, 2011).
 6. **Permanent supportive housing for youth.** This type of housing typically serves youth ages 18 and up and follows a scattered-site model. It is similar to long-term affordable housing, but has more intensive services.
 7. **Transition in place programs.** These are programs that transfer the lease into the tenant's name once the tenant is ready for independent living. A housing subsidy may or may not continue. Generally, tenants can still access supportive services as needed.
 8. **Rapid re-housing.** This model operates with the goal of moving youth into permanent housing within 90 days of entering the program. There are three core components of this program: housing identification, rent and move-in assistance (financial), and rapid re-housing case management and services. The "Housing First" model is a key element of this program.

Examples of successful programs in the Southeast

Oasis Center

Oasis Center is a comprehensive program for at-risk youth in Nashville, Tennessee. It currently offers 21 programs, which range from the crisis teen shelter to a college counseling center for first generation college students. The Oasis Center was founded in 1969 to offer safety and support to at-risk or homeless youth. It serves approximately 3,000 youth and their families each year. It also reaches an additional 9,000 youth and adults through educational projects and presentations.

In 2009, the Oasis Center opened the Youth Opportunity Center (YOC) in order to have one place that could meet all of the needs of their youth. Nine youth agencies collaborated under the same roof in the 39,000 square foot facility to provide a "one-stop shop" for the youth. These additional agencies include STARS Nashville (school-based student assistance), Youth CAN (career counseling and support), Meharry Youth Wellness Center (healthcare), Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle

Tennessee (mentoring), and TCASN (Tennessee College Access & Success Network; post-secondary education promotion). The goals for developing this center included: (1) aligning existing youth initiatives, resources, and expertise; (2) expanding the services facing the greatest demand; (3) increasing the back-office operating efficiency of the partner agencies; and (4) removing as many barriers as possible that may be preventing youth from accessing help.

One main focus of Oasis center is to provide crisis and residential support. These programs include the Emergency Youth Shelter, the Street Outreach Program, Memorial Foundation Outreach Center, Harwell Lofts, and Project Safe Place. The Emergency Youth Shelter is a residential shelter for youth between the ages of 13 and 17 who have runaway or are homeless. It is a two-week therapeutic program that provides respite, support, and healing. For those residents in the emergency shelter, 96% of those residents were safely reunited with their families at the end of their two-week stay. In addition, 94% of youth reported that they felt safer returning home and better able to ensure their own safety.

The Street Outreach Program has a team of staff and volunteers that reaches out to homeless youth on the street weekly in order to inform them of resources. The program reached 135 youth in crisis last year and empowered them to increase their personal safety through a stable living situation. Youth who come to the Memorial Foundations Outreach Center can enjoy a hot meal and have access to a shower, laundry facilities, and a change of clothes. In addition, youth also have access to counseling, job assistance, and permanent housing.

The Harwell Lofts is a transitional living program that offers homeless youth between the ages of 18 and 21 the opportunity to live independently at the Oasis Center. They may stay in these lofts for up to 20 months. They learn life skills, obtain education and employment support, and have an adult mentor. The goal for each resident is to increase connections within the community to become more independent. In 2011/2012 fiscal year, 100% of formerly homeless youth in the transitional living program were employed and/or in school and in a safe living situation.

In addition to the programs described above, Oasis Center also offers Building Bridges, College Connection, the Oasis Bike Workshop, Just Us, the R.E.A.L. Program, and the Right Turn Program. Through the Building Bridges program, 150 of the most at-risk youth participate in an intensive summer leadership experience. Youth completing this program show 52% lower risk of school suspension, 60% lower risk of academic failure, 53% lower risk of pregnancy, and 50% lower risk of school dropout. Oasis College Connection is a center dedicated to assisting first generation college students. They assist with admissions and financial aid in order to increase acceptance rates, retention, and successful degree completion. Over \$1,900,000 in financial aid was accessed for first-generation college students who utilized the College Connection center. The Oasis Bike Workshop is a collaboration between the Oasis Center and Halcyon Bike Shop. The Workshop is a free, six-week program that provides youth with a bike and teaches them about exercise, sustainable transportation, and being agents of change in their community. Over 400 youth have completed the program since June 2009.

The Just Us program is dedicated to serving high school students who identify as LGBT. The R.E.A.L. Program (Reaching Excellence As Leaders) is an “no nonsense” intervention program for teens who have been in the Juvenile Justice system. This program can serve as an alternative to detention centers. R.E.A.L. Program graduates are shown to have a re-offend rate 17% or less, compared to the national average re-offend rate of 55%. Similarly, the Right Turn program provides alternative resources for those youth involved with the juvenile court system. Participants develop a goal plan that includes education, job placement, restorative justice activities, and violence reduction. In addition, they work with mentors and become more involved in the community.

Covenant House

Covenant House International is a large nonprofit agency that serves homeless youth through a network of shelters and is the largest privately funded agency in the United States. They have shelters in Anchorage, Atlanta, Atlantic City, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale, Houston, Los Angeles, Managua, Mexico City, Milpas Atlas, Newark, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Orlando, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Tegucigalpa, Toronto, Vancouver, and Washington D.C. Across all 21 shelters, Covenant House served over 50,000 at-risk and homeless youth last year. Covenant House Georgia (CHG) in Atlanta is the focus of this report as it is the closest in proximity and most similar to Columbia.

CHG serves and shelters both males and females ages 18 to 21 and provides short-term crisis care for youth ages 12 to 17. They have served more than 15,000 youth since opening in 2000 and serve approximately 1,300 each year. They have five main services that are offered: outreach, crisis care, independent living, support services, and mental health services. Street Outreach consists of teams that are made up of staff and resident youth who are familiar with the areas where homeless youth may be living. They see anywhere between 50 and 200 youth a month.

Crisis care includes the crisis shelter, which is a residential program for youth ages 18 to 21. It serves youth who are in immediate need of housing and crisis intervention. Youth are provided necessities for up to 30 days, with the possibility of an extension. They have an open intake policy, in which no child is ever turned away from services. Clients receive meals, showers, beds, and clean clothes. Within 72 hours of arrival, they undergo a thorough assessment at their in-house clinic to identify and treat physical and mental health conditions. In addition, every young person is assessed for job readiness, educational status, and legal status. They have a lawyer on staff to help with unresolved legal issues and to help the youth know their legal rights. For youth who decide to stay in the continuum of care program, an individual case plan will be developed.

The Independent Living – Rights of Passage program is a semi-independent, long-term transitional housing program designed to build upon the individual case plan developed in the crisis shelter. They may remain in the program for up to 24 months. The program has 21 double-occupancy apartments (42 beds) within a mainstream apartment complex. There are onsite case managers to assist with the continuation of case plans. Within the first 30 days, residents go through an orientation to independent living. They use public transportation, must meet domestic

requirements, and must maintain a safe and productive living environment. They learn how to take care of themselves, find and keep a job, save money, pay bills on time, cook a health meal, and clean. Since financial stability is a goal of the program, residents are required to turn over part of their salary to place into a savings account through Covenant House. This account is returned to them at the end of their stay.

CHG's support services include: educational services, job services, health and wellness, life skills development, and other services. Grade-level proficiency, readiness to pass the GED, and ability to attend college and/or vocational schools is addressed in the educational program. CHG offers onsite GED test preparation, tutoring, basic literacy educational courses, and assistance with financial aid and admission process for post-secondary institutions. The vocational program helps prepare youth to enter the job market. They learn how to find a job, how to build a resume, how to develop interview skills, what professional behavior is, and what general office etiquette is. Every youth who comes to CHG receives a physical upon entry into the program by Community Advanced Practice Nurses (CAPN). Any issues identified in the physical will then be addressed with one of their health provider partnerships. The youth are also taught good health, hygiene habits, and healthy eating. Vegetables are also harvested from their own organic garden and are included in the evening meals. The life readiness program provides youth with vital trainings on personal budgeting, financial planning, pursuing a career-track job, community building, strengthening family relations, and many other areas. Programs and services can also be flexible to meet each youth's unique needs. Youth may also receive individual and group counseling, experiential therapy, and pastoral counseling.

Local Housing Programs Targeting Youth

Palmetto Place

Palmetto Place provides housing to youth between the ages of 0 to 21 (or up until the day before their 22nd birthday) who have experienced abuse, neglect, or homelessness. A maximum of 20 youth can be served at one time. Sixteen beds are reserved for youth who are referred by DSS and who have been pulled from their homes due to abuse or neglect. This leaves only four beds that have been reserved for unaccompanied youth, and approximately 1 to 2 unaccompanied youth are turned away a month. Beds are given on a first come, first served basis if the youth is identified as fitting into the program. Most of the unaccompanied youth at Palmetto Place are juniors or seniors in high school, and they typically live at Palmetto Place until they graduate and go onto the next path (i.e., post-secondary school, employment, or military). In addition to housing, the youth are also taught teen life skills, including how to use public transportation, open a bank account, do laundry, cook, go to the grocery store, obtain benefits (i.e., Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP), apply for jobs and schools, interview, obtain financial aid, and serve as a parent. In addition, youth are also provided with transportation, food, and clothing. Palmetto Place helps enroll youth in after school activities, provides tutoring through Richland County School District 2, visits colleges, and helps with driver's education and getting a license. They also help youth formulate future goals.

In order to be served, the youth has to be identified as unaccompanied by a social worker at their school. If a student is identified through the school districts, the McKinney-Vento liaison will contact Palmetto Place and ask if there is an empty bed. On the rare chance that there is an empty bed available, a Palmetto Place employee will interview that student in order to insure that it would be a good fit for the student. The interview asks about the student's feelings about having a roommate, sharing a bathroom, having meals served at certain times, having planned activities that youth are expected to attend, having rules and guidelines, and future goals. Palmetto Place is for youth who are interested in finishing high school and not for youth who only want to stay for one or two days.

Palmetto Place does not accept runaways and youth with sex-related charges. If a young person runs away from the residence, they will no longer be able to stay there due to Palmetto Place's secure location. In addition, Palmetto Place is cautious about youth with a history with the Department of Juvenile Justice. For more information, visit their website www.palmettoplaceshelter.org.

Growing Home Southeast

Growing Home Southeast is a nonprofit agency that enables at-risk youth and children to become productive citizens and contribute to their communities. They provide housing for youth between the ages of 0 and 26. Many of the youth who reside in a Growing Home-related residence have come from an institution (e.g., Department of Juvenile Justice, hospital). All foster homes are licensed to house youth age 0 to 21. As of April 1, 2014, the youngest child was 5 years old and the oldest was 19 years old in foster homes.

Leaphart Place is a residential program for youth in transition age 18 to 26 who have aged out or transitioned out of foster care or other state-assisted living arrangements and are at risk for homelessness. Youth at Leaphart Place must have some skills to live on their own and have to have an Axis I mental health diagnosis. While at Leaphart Place, they are educated about their mental health diagnosis, learn independent living skills, and work on getting a job and/or completing school.

In order to enroll at Leaphart Place, a referral has to be completed. Approximately 80% of referrals come through the Department of Mental Health. Other youth are referred through the Department of Social Services and the school districts. The referrals are then sent to a team to be reviewed. Because of the funding source, youth are ruled out if they are not over the age of 18, are not aging out of foster care or other institution, have felonies or have sex-related charges, and do not have an Axis I diagnosis. As of April 1st, 2014, at least 10 youth had been turned away. Having a mental health diagnosis allows the rent at Leaphart Place to be subsidized. Youth usually pay the subsidized rent with SSI check or have a family member cosign. Youth are then interviewed. They are told that Leaphart Place is not an independent living program, but rather supported housing. Staff is not at Leaphart Place at all times. The youth have to be willing to receive mental health counseling to receive subsidy. In addition, youth are required to do 25 hours of productivity. Youth engage in an independent living skills group once a month where they work on resumes, budgeting, laundry, etc. For more information, visit www.growinghomese.com.

Recommendations

It appears that there is a substantial unaccompanied youth and youth in transition population in Columbia. According to the current data, it seems to be a growing problem. Through interviews with service providers, it seems that there are providers who are willing to continue working on this issue and on addressing the needs of this population in Columbia. However, there appears to be diverse perceptions on the issue across service providers.

Key activities should focus on the following:

- Improve data collection on the unaccompanied youth population. This may include identifying how sources may be able to collect more equivalent information to provide a more complete picture of the population in order to be better able to tailor services to Columbia's specific population. Additional data will be collected from interviews with unaccompanied youth as they are able to provide experiential expertise on their own needs and the resources that they use and may still need.
- Focus on how to use or adapt the best practices described above to address the needs in Columbia. Start with further examining the resources that we have in the city to determine how to build off of those resources. Determine how to better foster collaboration across service providers to fill in the gaps in services and will determine whether it will be necessary to develop a new facility for serving youth in transition.