The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Institute for
Child & Family Wellbeing
Steve Hicks School of Social Work

A Community Participatory Study of Homelessness

Among Youth with Experience in Foster Care

January 2025

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This report would not have been possible without the open conversations with stakeholders representing child welfare, public housing, homeless response, and programs serving transition-aged youth. They spoke about their daily efforts providing and improving programs and services, while also acknowledging shortfalls and controversies and offering ideas for solutions. Youth provided insights into their experiences navigating community resources and accessing housing programs and shared their recommendations for creating more youth-friendly services and programs.

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ECHO

CHANGE 1 CHANGE ONE MIND. CHANGE ONE LIFE.

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Study Team

Barbara Ball, PhD, LPC-AT, is a research scientist at the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing. Dr. Ball's work focuses on the experiences of older youth in child welfare, specifically relational permanency, sexual health, and healthy relationships. She is currently the Principal Investigator for the evaluation of THRIVE, a promising sexual health intervention for youth in foster care, child welfare professionals, and other supportive adults. Other projects have included the Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPS), which followed youth aging out of the foster care system over a 3-year period. TYPS demonstrated the importance of relational permanency for the emotional and social wellbeing of youth and highlighted the stressors and challenges youth experience as they transition to living independently.

Nicole Kim, MSSW, is a doctoral student at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work and serves as a graduate research assistant for the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing. Ms. Kim's research is guided by her experience as a foster parent and foster care caseworker in Texas. Following this experience, Nicole focused her studies on child welfare research and policy. She worked as a policy intern at Children's Rights and the Center for the Study of Social Policy where she was later hired as a policy analyst. In this role, she was part of a team monitoring state child welfare systems facing class-action litigation. Additionally, Nicole supported the Youth Thrive initiative, which worked to better support the development and well-being of youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Sara Fuetter, BS, is a research and evaluation analyst at the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) and works on analyzing data collected through the Austin/Travis County Continuum of Care (CoC). Ms. Fuetter completes data requests for community partners and analyzes CoC data for ECHO's annual racial disparities report. Past experiences include work in harm reduction and street outreach for individuals experiencing homelessness while completing an undergraduate degree at Ohio State University.

Cortney Jones, MSW, is the founder of Change 1, an Austin-based organization providing support for youth aging out of the foster care system by bridging the gaps in support they receive entering adulthood. Ms. Jones has 15+ years of experience in advocacy that make her the leader she is today. Looking from the lens of a CPS worker, a home study caseworker, a foster care youth and adoptive parent, she uses her lived experiences to be the solution.

Akram Al-Turk, PhD, is a research associate with the Moritz Center for Societal Impact at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work at The University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Al-Turk's primary research areas are affordable housing, homelessness, and healthcare. Before coming to UT Austin, he was the Senior Director of Research and Public Policy at the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), the lead agency in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System that coordinates community-wide strategies, research and evaluation, and funding to prevent and end homelessness. In this role, Akram coordinated and led ECHO's research, program evaluation, communications, and public policy work. He has a PhD in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Master of Public Affairs from the LBJ School at the University of Texas at Austin.

Krizia Ramirez Franklin is a former foster youth who aged out of care in 2009 after spending 16 years in the Texas child welfare system. Ms. Franklin graduated from Devine High School with 33 college credit hours, the highest in her class. She went on to earn a bachelor's in criminal justice in 2012, a bachelor's in public administration in 2015, and a master's degree in social work in 2021. She is the oldest of seven children and the mother of four beautiful children. She is a nationally known child welfare advocate and is the current chair of the San Antonio Head Start program. She is dedicated to doing her part to make the world a better place, not just for current and former foster youth, but for everyone.

Julian Flores is a driven entrepreneur originally from Austin, Texas, now based in New York City. With a degree in neuroscience and three years of experience in research, Julian has combined a passion for science and social impact. Having aged out of the foster system, Julian is deeply committed to raising awareness and supporting other foster youth, using personal experience and professional insight to advocate for lasting change. As a business owner, Julian continues to inspire others by blending entrepreneurial spirit with a heartfelt mission to give back to the community that shaped their journey.

Executive Summary

In Texas, 33% of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness at age 21, which is above the national average of 29%.[i] In Austin/Travis County, the number of young adults aged 18 to 25 who are seeking housing assistance through the homeless response system has nearly tripled in the past three years, increasing from 376 youth in Fiscal Year 2022 to 1,018 youth in Fiscal Year 2024. Among these youth, 53% report a history in foster care.[ii] It is evident that homeless prevention and intervention programs for youth in Austin/Travis County have not kept pace with the need in the community leading to the current crisis point.

Research shows that substance use and mental health concerns, criminal justice involvement, and placement instability are associated with increased risk for homelessness among youth aging out of foster care.[iii] On the other hand, strong connections to supportive adults, staying in foster care until age 21, and being a student or employed may prevent homelessness. The Texas Department of Child and Family Services (DFPS) has leveraged resources into expanding the youth housing program[iv] to assist as many youths as possible with locating housing and preventing homelessness among those exiting foster care. DFPS supports housing options both in-care and out-of-care. In-care housing options are offered through extended foster care for youth ages 18 to 21 years old, including Supervised Independent Living (SIL) and Transitional Living Programs (TLP); out-of-care housing options include access to voucher and rental assistance programs through collaboration with public housing authorities.

The present study sought to understand how child welfare systems, homeless response systems, and public housing authorities can better support young people's housing needs and long-term wellbeing. The research team developed an environmental scan of support services for youth with foster care history in Austin/Travis County, met with stakeholders, and interviewed eight young adults with lived experience in foster care and homelessness. Our findings are not generalizable to all youth with foster care experience or to other communities in Texas or nationally, but they provide important insights about the needs of youth in Austin/Travis County.

We generated the following recommendations for improving community coordination, developing capacity for prevention and intervention, and creating more youth-friendly and accessible services.

- **Strengthen prevention.** The increase in youth homelessness in Austin/Travis County shows the importance of strengthening

prevention efforts by the child welfare system. Additional Transitional Living Programs and Supervised Independent Living programs with Extended Case Management would be important tools for supporting the most vulnerable youth who need a safe space to develop independent living skills. These placement options should be designed to help youth develop agency, competency, and healthy relationships.

- **Develop a more youth-friendly homeless response system**. Additional community efforts are needed for strengthening the homeless response system and developing youth-friendly access points and assessments, not only for youth who are experiencing homelessness, but also for those at imminent risk of homelessness.
- **Expand housing options for youth**. Increased funding and infrastructure for homelessness diversion, flexible emergency and gap housing, as well as expanded housing voucher programs and supportive services are needed in Austin/Travis County to prevent and intervene with homelessness among youth with history in foster care. In Fiscal Year 2024, only 17% of youth with experience in foster care who completed a Coordinated Entry Assessment entered a permanent housing program that same year, down from 34% of youth in Fiscal Year 2023 and 33% of youth in Fiscal Year 2022.
- **Increase use of data for community planning and coordination.** The utilization of both in-care and out-of-care housing options for former foster youth is strikingly uneven across Texas communities. While Austin/Travis County notes high utilization of all available housing options in the face of a youth homelessness crisis, other communities report unused capacity. This report demonstrates the need for data to drive community collaboration, coordination, and planning. In addition, cross-system training and information sharing about the different in-care and out-of-care housing options, are needed so that providers can more effectively coordinate resources and referrals.

The study team emphasized the importance of uplifting youth voices. Youth participants called for shifts in how youth-serving professionals and community members relate to youth and support their housing journeys. Above all, youth need to be involved in designing tools for navigating resources and flexible programs that meet their needs.

- **Get to know youth.** Listen to their needs and goals to develop meaningful transition and housing plans.
- **Allow youth to revisit and revise their housing plans and stay flexible.** Recognize that youth are not adults and that they need time to develop their own goals. Housing plans will change.

- **Give youth more choices in their housing journey.** Provide opportunities for youth to learn through experience and to practice decision making. Offer ongoing hands-on support in exploring housing options.
- **Make resources easier to find, access, and navigate**. Engage youth in designing tools to identify community resources that can help them with managing tough times.
- **Increase opportunities for peer mentorship and leadership.** Engage youth in program development and facilitate peer mentorship and community building.

It is our hope that this report will increase awareness of the trauma of homelessness for youth with foster care experience; contribute to improved coordination between child welfare, homeless response, public housing authorities, and youth-serving providers; and help the community move toward more youth-friendly and youth-driven prevention and response. For a more detailed explanation of our study and its findings, we encourage you to read our full report.

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Background and Purpose

Background

Studies across the United States estimate 12% of youth experience homelessness immediately after leaving foster care[v] and up to 46% of youth who age out experience homelessness at least once by age 26.[vi] In Texas, 33% of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness at age 21, which is above the national average of 29%.[vii] In Austin/Travis County, the number of young adults ages 18 to 25, who are seeking housing assistance through the homeless response system has nearly tripled in the past three years, from 376 youth in Fiscal Year 2022 to 1018 youth in Fiscal Year 2024. Among these youth, 538 (53%) reported a history in foster care.[viii] These data snapshots demonstrate that homelessness among young adults with experience in foster care is an urgent social problem that needs to be addressed at the local, state, and national levels.

Youth who age out of the foster care system without strong and lasting connections to adults who can provide guidance and emotional, financial, and instrumental supports are at increased risk for several adverse adult outcomes, including homelessness, high unemployment rates, low educational attainment, sexual exploitation, and early or unintended pregnancies.[ix] Among the strongest protective factors against homelessness are having a strong connection to an adult, remaining in extended foster care until age 21, and being engaged in education and employment. Conversely, substance use and mental health concerns, criminal justice involvement, and a history of disrupted placements including runaway episodes or being without placement have been found to be associated with increased risk for homelessness.[x]

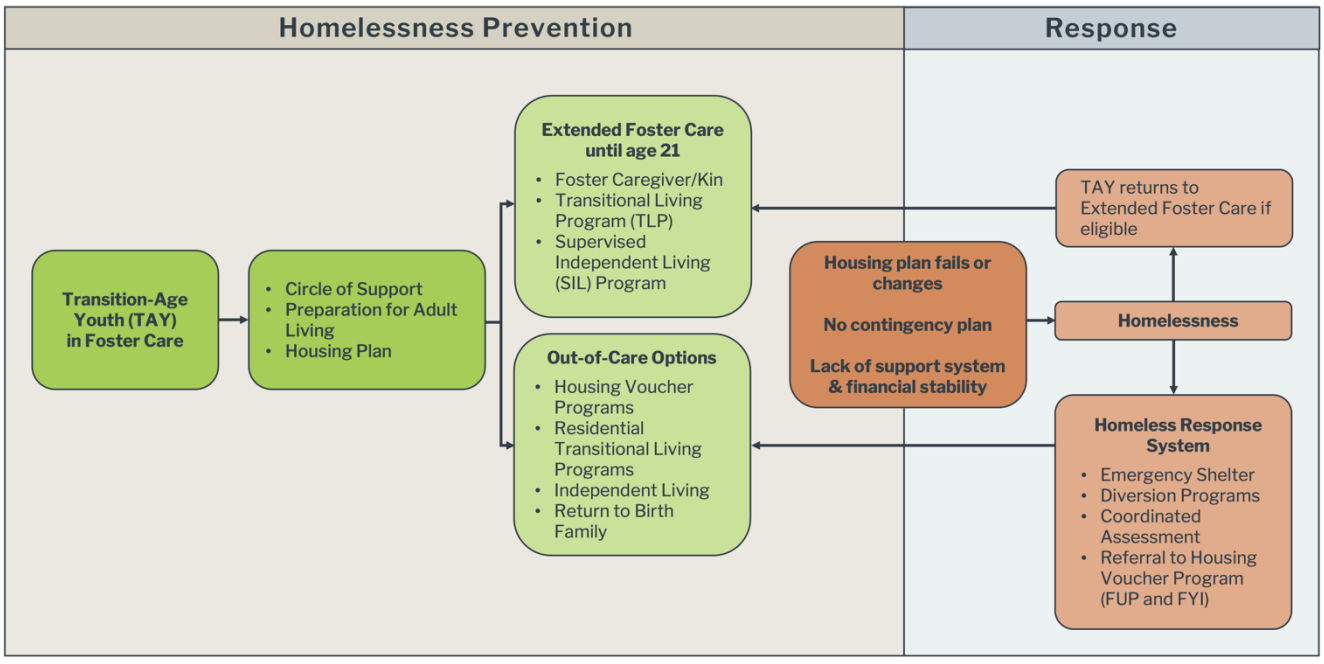
The Texas Department of Child and Family Services (DFPS) has leveraged resources into expanding the youth housing program[xi] to assist as many youths as possible with locating housing and preventing homelessness among those exiting foster care. DFPS supports housing options both in-care and out-of-care. In-care housing options are offered through extended foster care for youth ages 18 to 21, including Supervised Independent Living (SIL) and Transitional Living Programs (TLP); out-of-care housing options include access to voucher and rental assistance programs through public housing authorities.

Extended foster care is intended to reduce the risk for homelessness. Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that remaining in foster care and continuously receiving academic support and financial assistance at ages 17

to 19 protects foster youth from experiencing homelessness at ages 19 to 21.[xii, xiii] Despite these encouraging findings, utilization of extended foster care is low, especially in Texas. In 2021, 17% of the Texas foster youth population were 18 years and older. However, only 5% of Texas youth who were in foster care on their 18th birthday were still in extended foster care on their 19th birthday, compared to 24% nationally.[xiv] Recent investigations into the underutilization of extended care show that Texas youth experience many hurdles and restrictions in extended foster care and have few placement options that offer developmentally appropriate independence as well as support and stability.[xv]

While increased access to extended care and in-care housing options may be a solution for some youth, others will benefit from out-of-care housing options, such as housing vouchers and rental assistance. Therefore, DFPS is working to increase the utilization of voucher programs for youth with history in foster care, which is an important tool for preventing and ending homelessness for this vulnerable population. Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers are administered by local public housing authorities in collaboration with DFPS and third parties. Figure 1 illustrates housing plans for transition-age youth in foster care including in-care and out-of-care housing options. When housing plans fail or disrupt and youth become homeless, they may seek assistance through the homeless response system and seek to return to foster care, if eligible.

Figure 1: Housing Options for Youth Exiting Foster Care in Texas



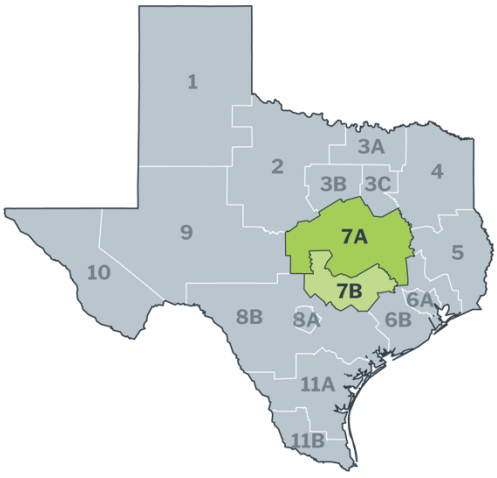
Purpose and Scope of This Study

Homelessness among youth with history in foster care is a national problem, but effective strategies for preventing and ending homelessness require resources and collaboration in individual communities. Most of all, efforts need to be informed and led by youth, their needs, experiences, and recommendations. Therefore, the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing (TXICFW) partnered with the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), the lead agency in the Austin/Travis County Homelessness Response System, and Change 1, an Austin-based organization that provides support for youth aging out of the foster care system, and hired two young adult consultants with lived experience in foster care and housing insecurity. The team worked collaboratively to examine current policies, practices, and programs that aim to prevent and intervene with homelessness and better understand how youth with history in foster care experience and navigate these programs.

The study team

- examined data on youth homelessness in Austin/Travis County;
- developed an environmental scan of homeless prevention and intervention for youth with foster care history in Austin/ Travis County;
- conducted group interviews with stakeholders; and
- interviewed young adults with lived experience in foster care and homelessness.

Figure 2: Map of DFPS Regions



This report primarily focused on Austin/Travis County, located in DFPS Region 7B. Figure 2 shows a map of DFPS regions. DFPS is in the midst of transitioning to a Community-Based Care model which will entail a restructuring and privatization of services in regions 7A and 7B. While it is unclear how this change will impact the current efforts of supporting the housing needs of youth aging out of care, it provides an opportunity to improve practices and programs at the regional and community level. The research team hopes this report will increase awareness of the trauma of homelessness for youth with foster care experience; contribute to improved coordination between child

welfare, homeless services, public housing authorities, and youth-serving providers; and help the community move toward more youth-friendly and youth-driven prevention and intervention with homelessness.

Methods

Study Team

This study utilized a participatory research framework and involved academic researchers, staff from community organizations, and individuals with lived experience in designing and executing research activities. Each partner and member on the study team brought important and complementary perspectives and expertise to the project. TXICFW has worked for over a decade to improve how systems interact with children and families through research, evaluation, and capacity building in child welfare, adolescent health, and economic and social supports for families. ECHO is the backbone organization for Austin/Travis County's Homelessness Response System and Change 1 provides direct support and advocacy for youth aging out of the foster care system. In addition, we recruited two young adults with lived experience in foster care and housing insecurity as consultants who participated in all phases of the study.

The study team met biweekly over a 6-month period and collaboratively refined the research questions, conducted an environmental scan of available resources and programs, designed interview guides, developed outreach strategies to recruit youth with lived experience for interviews, and conducted stakeholder and youth interviews. Findings and recommendations outlined in this report were reviewed and discussed by the whole team in multiple rounds of individual and group feedback.

Data Collection

This study included multiple data sources, including a review of current practices and policies for in-care and out-of-care housing options, data from the Homelessness Response System in Austin/Travis County, and interviews with stakeholders and young adults with lived experience. Study procedures were approved by the IRB at The University of Texas at Austin.

Data on Youth Homelessness in Austin/Travis County

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a person-level database that community providers use to assess and track needs and resources. Homeless individuals seeking housing assistance through the Homeless Response System in Austin/Travis County complete a Coordinated

Assessment which will be described in detail later in this report. For this study we pulled HMIS data for Fiscal Years 2022–2024 that include overall Coordinated Assessment information, locations where assessments were completed, demographic data, other risk factors for homelessness such as developmental, mental, and physical disabilities and experience of domestic violence, and service utilization.

Environmental Scan

The study team developed an environmental scan to identify homeless prevention and intervention for youth with histories in foster care. We focused on extended foster care, also referred to as in-care housing options, and out-of-care housing options and homeless services in Austin/Travis County. As part of this process, the study team reviewed organizational policies and practices, access points, eligibility criteria, and gaps in the continuum of prevention and intervention.

Interviews with Stakeholders

Informed by the environmental scan, the team conducted individual and group interviews with staff representing the DFPS Transitional Living Program and Housing Program, Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and Independent Supervised Living (SIL) programs in the Austin-Round Rock metro area, ECHO's Coordinated Entry process, and regional public housing authorities that provide voucher programs for youth with history in foster care. While most stakeholder interviews focused on the Austin/Travis County area (DFPS Region 7B), we included interviews with public housing authorities north of Austin (DFPS Region 7A). The reasons for expanding the focus area were twofold. First, there are significant differences in how transition support services and housing voucher programs are administered across DFPS regions, which impact how youth access resources. Understanding these differences is instructive for appraising successes and challenges in each region. Second, youth frequently move within and across DFPS regions and some providers serve youth across regions.

We conducted a total of 14 stakeholder interviews via Zoom, which lasted on average 60–75 minutes. These included interviews with five public housing authorities; five providers of transitional services, Transitional Living Programs, and Independent Supervised Living; two interviews with DFPS representatives; and two interviews with staff at ECHO. Two or more study team members were present at each interview. In most interviews, the stakeholder organization was represented by a team of staff, rather than individuals. Eleven interviews were recorded and transcribed and three

interviews were conducted in a more informal manner. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) and focused on stakeholders' support of young people's housing needs, eligibility criteria for support and programs provided, barriers to accessing services, and perceived gaps and barriers in the continuum of services.

Interviews with Young Adults

Study partners recruited young adults ages 18–25 with lived experience in foster care who had encountered homelessness or housing instability in Austin and/or surrounding areas. Study information was disseminated via social media, listservs, youth-serving organizations, foster care liaisons at community colleges, and personal networks.

Recruitment efforts over two months resulted in eight young adults participating in Zoom interviews that lasted on average 45 minutes. Recruitment challenges, such as scheduling time for interviews with youth who are highly transient and experience many daily stressors, limited our sample size. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B) and were recorded and transcribed. Participants received a $50 gift card. Interviews with youth focused on their transition out of care, their planning or preparation for obtaining housing, experiences with homelessness or housing insecurity, navigation of resources and housing programs, and recommendations for improving services. All eight participants had experienced homelessness or housing insecurity but were currently safely housed via extended foster care or a housing voucher program. Three of the eight participants were parents of young children. Their experiences and housing journeys varied considerably and provided important insights in opportunities and challenges with current homeless prevention and intervention strategies.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

We used descriptive statistics to analyze data on youth homelessness in Austin/Travis County over a three-year period (Fiscal Years 2022–2024). We sought to identify trends over time and compare young adults (ages 18–25) with and without self-reported experience in foster care with regard to demographics, prioritization for services, factors contributing to their homelessness, access to the Homeless Response System, and service utilization.

Qualitative Data

The study team followed guidelines of Consensual Qualitative Research[xvi] for the analysis of interviews with stakeholders and youth. The two primary authors, who are both experienced in qualitative data analysis, conducted a thematic analysis and discussed emerging themes with each other and the larger study team. The primary authors began by reviewing interview transcripts to become familiar with the different perspectives of youth and stakeholders. They identified patterns in the data and manually coded them into similar data segments that were then summarized with thematic statements. The first round of analysis focused on each individual stakeholder or youth interview and was followed by analysis across cases and stakeholder groups. In a last step, the full research team worked on integrating thematic statements across stakeholders to highlight different perspectives, key findings, and recommendations. Throughout the iterative process, the team sought to find consensus through group discussion.

Findings

Presentation of Findings

Data from the Homeless Response System, the environmental scan, and qualitative findings from stakeholder and youth interviews provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of homelessness among young adults with foster care experience in Austin/Travis County.

The presentation of findings is separated into three sections:

1. Data from the Homeless Response System capture youth ages 18–25 who experience literal homelessness and take a Coordinated Assessment to seek housing assistance in Austin/Travis County. We analyzed data over three years and found a steep increase in youth homelessness and gaps in preventing and intervening with homelessness.
2. Extended foster care, or in-care housing options for youth 18–21 years of age, offer an important tool for the prevention of homelessness, both in the short term by providing safe and stable housing and in the long term by building life skills, supporting education and vocational training, and developing work experience and financial literacy. We examined successes, challenges, and gaps regarding in-care housing options available to youth in the Austin area.
3. Out-of-care housing options, including rental assistance programs, are helpful for youth once they exit the foster care system. Two voucher programs, the Family Unification Program (FUP) Voucher and the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Voucher, are specifically designed for youth ages 18–24 and aim to support those at risk of homelessness or already experiencing homelessness. We analyzed different approaches to administering voucher programs in Austin/Travis County and other communities in DFPS Region 7 and voucher utilization rates. Depending on the process for voucher administration, these programs are important tools in prevention and/or homeless response and intervention.

For sections two and three, we provide background information on policies and a brief description of services and housing programs including eligibility requirements; summarize stakeholder perspectives; highlight youth experiences; and present recommendations to address gaps and barriers to services. In highlighting the experiences of youth, we strive to show their individual housing journeys. We have assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and removed information that could identify them.

Data on Youth Homelessness in Austin/Travis County

In Austin/Travis County, homeless services are coordinated through the Continuum of Care (CoC), which also maintains a centralized process to connect people with potential housing programs across the community. The Coordinated Assessment serves as intake tool for services and is open to all individuals and families in Austin/Travis County experiencing homelessness as defined by HUD Category 1, which means they are living in the street or in a place not meant for human habitation, and HUD Category 4, which includes people who are actively fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking.

Coordinated Assessments are provided by a network of more than 75 trained assessors at 23 organizations in the Austin community. The assessment aims to evaluate what housing programs a person wants, needs, and may be eligible for. The assessors document demographic information, explore opportunities for diversion, and assess the participant's current living situation. If participants qualify under HUD Categories 1 or 4, they will then continue the assessment. A first set of questions identifies subpopulations prioritized and served by specialized providers, such as the elderly, youth, and survivors of domestic violence, and gathers information on additional factors including disabilities (developmental disabilities, mental and physical health disabilities), employment status, and income. This is followed by the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT), a self-report questionnaire consisting of 21 items asking about the individual's current episode and history of homelessness, the number of children in their household, their physical, mental, and behavioral health, and any experience with violence (Appendix C). The tool also assesses for foster care involvement, juvenile justice involvement, and level of education. The score on the APAT and the additional factors elicited in the Coordinated Assessment are taken together to prioritize people for housing and services who are least likely to self-resolve their homelessness without a formal intervention. Assessments are entered into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which records and tracks client-level information on their service needs.

Data from the Coordinated Assessment provide a snapshot of youth homelessness in Austin/Travis County and insight into trends over the last three years. The true number of youth homelessness is likely much higher, because many youths are unaware of the Coordinated Assessment, do not seek housing services through the Homeless Response System, or do not

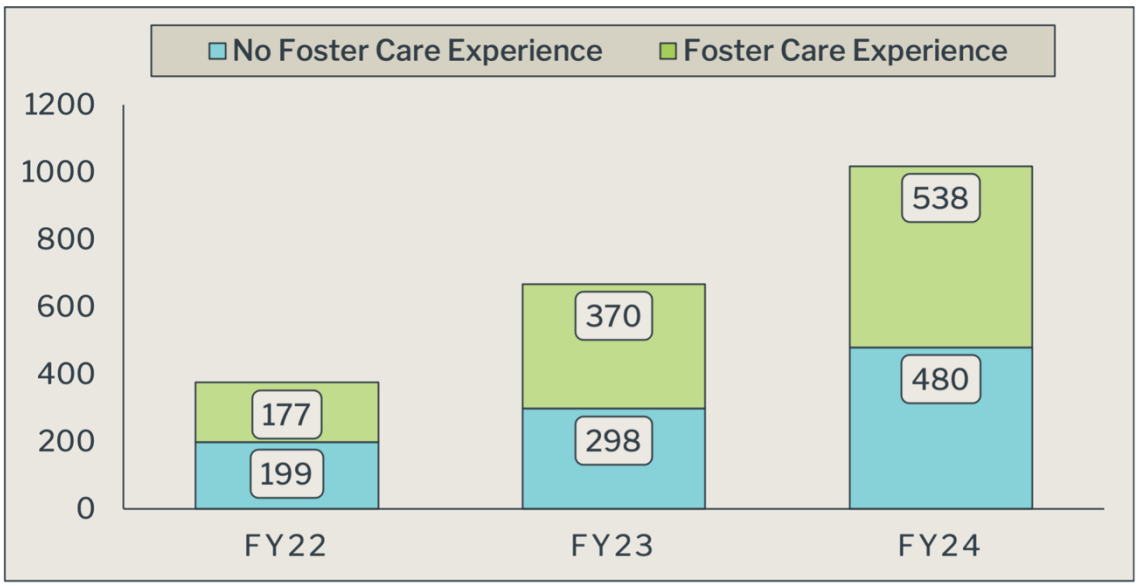
qualify for the Coordinated Assessment because they are couch surfing or house hopping.

Three-Year Trends

From Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 to FY 2024 the number of youth ages 18 – 25 who completed a Coordinated Assessment has dramatically increased from 376 to 1,018 youth. In FY 2024, 538 of those youth (53%) reported foster care involvement. These data trends are illustrated in Figure 3.

- The number of youths with foster care experience who completed a Coordinated Assessment has tripled in the past three years and risen faster than the number of youths who do not report foster care experience.
- Foster care involvement is self-reported by youth. Data on the location, time, and duration of foster care involvement are not collected.
- As will be described in the section on housing voucher administration, self-reported foster care involvement is later verified by DFPS, and not all youth may be verified.

Figure 3: Number of Youth Completing the Coordinated Assessment from FY 2022 to FY 2024



Location of Assessment for Housing Services

In Fiscal Year 2024, most youth with foster care experience completed Coordinated Assessments at LifeWorks (41%; *n* = 222) and at the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center (41%; *n* = 222), with the remaining assessments spread out across other locations. The Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center

is the largest provider of homeless services in Travis County, while LifeWorks specializes in serving homeless youth and providing transition services for youth in foster care.

- As the primary youth-serving provider in Austin/Travis County, LifeWorks has seen a seven-fold increase of assessments for youth with history in foster care over the past three years, rising from 32 assessments in FY 2022 to 222 assessments in FY 2024. In the same time frame, the number of Coordinated Assessments for youth with foster care experience at the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center increased from 87 to 222.
- In our interview, LifeWorks staff credited their street outreach and revitalized youth resource center with the increase in Coordinated Assessments for youth with foster care experience, however, they also noted an increased need in the community—a need that is reaching a crisis point.

> *'We have unprecedented numbers of clients served and celebrate the success of our team and being available and being a resource where there's need in the community, we're meeting that need. Then that also means there's more people that are in crisis. That's a negative thing. I think outreach plays a big part. When we think of last year, maybe a little bit over a year, our outreach team was doing half the outreach and had half the connections and was not fully staffed with coordinated assessors. Now we're 100% coordinated assessors. We're going out twice as much. We have twice the connection. We've increased our Coordinated Assessment completion."*

Demographic Characteristics

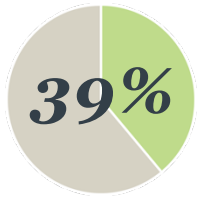
In FY 2024, 39% of youth with history in foster care were younger than 21, 61% were female, and 43% were Black or African American. Table 3 outlines the demographics for youth with foster care experience who completed a Coordinated Assessment in 2024, while Figures 4 and 5 show details on age and race/ethnicity breakdowns.

- It is notable that 39% of youth who sought housing services and reported a history in foster care were younger than 21. Since the Coordinated Assessment only asks whether the participant has ever been in foster care, we cannot ascertain whether they were in foster care the day before they turned 18, which would make them eligible to return to foster care and receive after-care services. It is also unknown where they entered the foster care system, which could be anywhere in Texas or out of state and impact their eligibility for in-care and out-of-care housing programs.

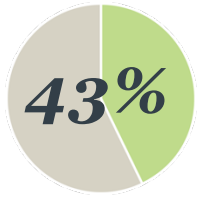
- The overrepresentation of Black or African American youth among the those experiencing homelessness reflects their overrepresentation in foster care. While African American children account for about 12% of the under 18 child population statewide, they account for 22% of removals and foster care placements.[xvii] In Travis County, these disparities are even more pronounced. African American children account for only 8% of the under 18 child population, but for 38% of children removed.

Table 3: Demographics for Youth with Foster Care Experience Completing a Coordinated Assessment in FY 2024

Age	Number of Youth (*N* = 538)	% of Youth
18	57	11%
19	75	14%
20	77	14%
21	59	11%
22	66	12%
23	73	14%
24	79	15%
25	52	10%
Gender		
Female	329	61%
Male	205	38%
Other Gender or No Single Gender	4	1%
Racial/Ethnic Identity		
Black or African American	231	43%
Hispanic/Latin(o)(a)(x)	154	29%
White	93	17%
Two or more races	48	9%
Other	4	1%
Unknown	8	1%



were younger than 21.



identified as Black or African American.

Note: The categories for race and ethnicity captured in the Coordinated Assessment are mutually exclusive

Risk Factors

When specific risk factors for homelessness were considered, youth with foster care experience reported higher prevalence of developmental, mental, and physical disabilities and domestic violence experience than youth without foster care experience. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and youth may report more than one risk factor. The increased risk among youth with self-reported foster care experience was especially pronounced with regard to mental health disabilities and experiences of domestic violence. Table 4 outlines these differences in the prevalence of risk factors.

- Youth with foster care experience also scored higher on the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT; average score 9.9 out of 21 in FY 2024) than youth without foster care experience (7.4 out of 21 in FY 2024), making it more likely for them to be referred to a housing program.

Table 4: Risk Factors in Homelessness for Youth with Foster Care Experience Compared to Youth Without Foster Care Experience for Coordinated Assessments Completed in FY 2024

	Youth With Foster Care Experience		**Youth Without Foster Care Experience**	
	# Youth	% Youth	# Youth	% Youth
Developmental Disability	107 (*n*=510)	21%	75 (*n*=408)	18%
Mental Health Disability	219 (*n*=510)	43%	119 (*n*=413)	29%
Physical Disability	50 (*n*=510)	10%	34 (*n*=413)	8%
Domestic Violence Experience	313 (*n*=537)	58%	241 (*n*=476)	51%

Homeless Services Utilization Among Youth with Foster Care Experience

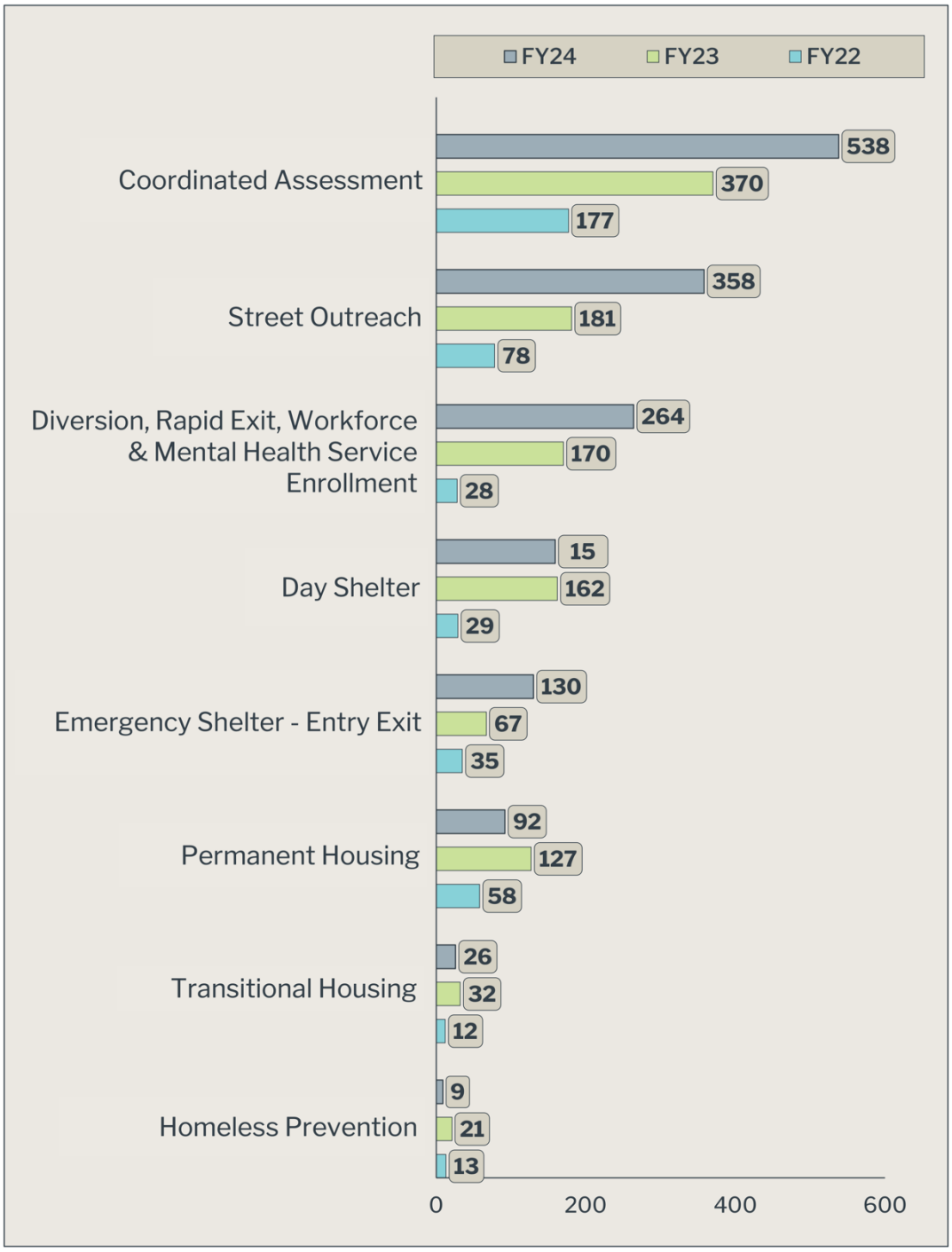
In FY 2024, the primary services youth with foster care experience received through the Homeless Response System included street outreach (66.5%), diversion and enrollment in workforce development and mental health services (49%), day shelter (30%), and emergency shelter (24%). Diversion

services represent the least intensive intervention and utilize flexible funding to quickly connect people to immediate housing. Examples of diversion include one-time financial assistance to cover an apartment application fee or help to pay with transportation to stay with friends or family.

Service utilization data for youth with foster care experience also demonstrate the small number of youths who are enrolled in a housing program in the same year they first completed the Coordinated Assessment. Compared to the increase in the number of Coordinated Assessments, the number of youths enrolled in a housing program—whether transitional housing, rapid rehousing, or another permanent housing program—is small and has stagnated or even decreased as shown in Figure 4.

- In FY 2022, 33% of youth (n = 58) entered a permanent housing program in the year they first completed the Coordinated Assessment, and in FY 2023, 34% of youth (n = 127) entered permanent housing. However, in FY 2024, that number dropped to 17% of youth (n = 92) who completed a Coordinated Assessment that same year.
- Among permanent housing programs, Rapid Rehousing serves the vast majority of youth. In FY 2024, 77 out of 92 youth who entered a permanent housing program were served through Rapid Rehousing, which also includes the provision of housing voucher programs that will be discussed in-depth in the following sections of this report.
- The Coordinated Assessment can be repeated every 6 months or whenever there is a change in the composition of the household. This means youth can stay on the waitlist for many years and may be enrolled in a housing program in subsequent years. For example, while 77 youth who first completed the Coordinated Assessment in FY 2024 were enrolled in Rapid Rehousing that same year, there were an additional 13 youth with Coordinated Assessments from previous years who were also enrolled in Rapid Rehousing in FY 2024.

Figure 4: Service Utilization for Youth with Foster Care Experience in FY 2022, FY 2023, and FY 2024



Note: These data show the services a youth with foster care experience received in the year they first completed their Coordinated Assessment and entered the homeless response system. Youth may have received services in multiple categories. Youth were only counted once in each service category even if they received the service multiple times.

Summary

- The number of homeless youths captured through the Coordinated Assessment in Austin/Travis County has nearly tripled over the last three years, with 53% of these youth reporting a history in foster care. This increase is likely driven by improved outreach and assessment capacity in the community but also reflects increased need among youth in the context of a tight housing market. Other factors, such as an increase in health and mental health problems after the COVID-19 pandemic may contribute to the overall picture and should be explored in future research.
- Homeless youth seeking services through the homeless response system are disproportionately female and Black or African American.
- Among homeless youth with experience in foster care, 39% are younger than 21, which means they may be eligible to return to extended foster care and should be directed to reconnect with their DFPS caseworker or Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) worker.
- Service utilization data demonstrate only a small number of youths (17% in Fiscal Year 2024) are enrolled in a permanent housing program in the same year they first complete the Coordinated Assessment. While there was a dramatic increase in the number of Coordinated Assessments, the number of youths enrolled in any housing program, whether transitional housing, rapid rehousing, or another permanent housing program, has stagnated and even decreased from FY 2023 to FY 2024.
- While the Coordinated Assessment provides some insight into the chronicity of homelessness, disparate health outcomes, other risk factors, and barriers to housing, assessment scores are not sufficient to ascertain what type of resources and housing programs are needed to adequately support youth, help them end their current housing crisis, and prevent recurrence in the future. Research is needed to better understand what type of intervention—ranging from light-touch diversion to street outreach, shelter, and housing programs—is effective in addressing the varying needs of youth who experience homelessness.
- There is currently no system in place to track the housing status for the overwhelming number of youths who are not being enrolled in housing programs. Research is needed to understand to which extent these youth can resolve their homelessness on their own and to examine their health, safety, and wellbeing.

Preventing Homelessness Through Extended Foster Care

Background: Extended Foster Care Requirements and Eligibility

In-care housing options, or extended foster care, provide an important avenue to preventing homelessness among youth aging out of the foster care system. After passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and state legislation in 2009, Texas elected to expand their existing Extended Foster Care Program. Extended care includes placements such as foster family homes, foster group homes, Transitional Living Programs (TLP), and Supervised Independent Living (SIL). Guidelines and requirements for extended foster care are set at the federal level.

Extended Foster Care Requirements

When youth opt to stay in extended foster care after turning age 18, they give DFPS continuing responsibility for their placement and care and agree to further their education, participate in an activity that removes barriers to employment, or work at least 80 hours per month, unless they have a documented medical condition. Youth can remain in extended foster care through the month of their 21st birthday, unless they are enrolled in a high school or GED program, in which case they can remain until their 22nd birthday. DFPS, the foster caregiver, or the youth can request a voluntary earlier discharge. An emergency discharge occurs when a youth no longer meets the requirements or if the foster caregiver or setting sets a discharge date due to the youth's behavior or noncompliance.

DFPS Extended Foster Care Agreement[xviii] :

- Attend high school or a program leading to a high school diploma or General Equivalence Diploma (GED).
- Attend an institution of higher education or a postsecondary vocational or technical program. The number of hours that I am enrolled must be consistent with my transition plan, and I must attend a minimum of six hours per semester.
- Participate in a program or activity that promotes or removes barriers to employment. My participation must total a minimum of 15 hours per week and must be consistent with my transition plan.
- Be employed at least 80 hours per month. Or, I

- Have a documented medical condition that prevents me from participating in the activities described in numbers 1 through 4.

Trial Independence and Return for Extended Foster Care

A young adult who was in DFPS managing conservatorship when turning 18 and who leaves care will have a trial independence period for at least 6 months. Trial independence permits a young adult aged 18 or older to voluntarily leave foster care for up to 6 months (or up to 12 months with a court order) and live independently without losing foster care eligibility.

The young adult may return to extended foster care at any time prior to the month before their 21st birthday, provided they meet the requirements for extended foster care, either during trial independence or after trial independence has ended. Inquiries about returning to foster care are handled by the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Coordinator in the region where the youth live.

Youth in Texas are eligible to return for Extended Foster Care if they[xix]:

- Are 18, 19, or 20 years old;
- were in DFPS conservatorship the day before turning 18;
- are able to meet at least one of the education or work-related criteria for Extended Foster Care, or be incapable of performing any of those activities due to a documented medical condition, within 30 days of placement as discussed in Eligibility for Extended Foster Care;
- are willing to sign or re-sign the Extended Foster Care Agreement.

Return to extended foster care is contingent on finding an available placement willing to accept the young adult. A criminal background check and Texas Child Abuse and Neglect Central Registry check is performed. If criminal activity or a "reason to believe" disposition is found, this could affect the ability to find a placement.

Transitional Living Programs

Transitional Living Programs (TLPs) can either be licensed through DFPS or be out-of-care residential placements for youth aged 18 and older who need support for the transition to independence.

TLPs that are licensed through DFPS typically provide 24/7 supervision, case management, therapy, life skills training, and educational, vocational, and financial support. Programming and support in TLPs are more intensive than the Supervised Independent Living programs described below and are often considered a steppingstone toward living independently. However, there is currently only one DFPS licensed TLP in the Austin area.

TLPs in the Austin area include:

- Transitional Living Programs (Foster Care): Settlement Home (Austin).
- Transitional Living Programs (Residential, Out of Care): Lifeworks (Austin), Gary Job Corps (San Marcos), Texas Baptist Children's Home (Round Rock), Annunciation Maternity Home (Georgetown).

Supervised Independent Living

Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs were first established in Texas in 2013 to provide a less restrictive, non-traditional living arrangement where young adults have minimal supervision and case management. SIL allows youth to practice independent living skills and achieve self-sufficiency in a supportive environment before leaving foster care. Despite placements being called supervised, youth are in fact not under daily supervision and meetings with the case manager occur monthly. Therefore, youth need to be independent and able to meet their daily needs. SIL settings include apartments, shared housing, college and non-college dorms, and other host homes. The SIL program provides housing, a food stipend, and a cell phone stipend and does not require the young adult to sign a lease.

SIL with Enhanced Case Management (ECM) services, instituted in 2020, is available to young adults with complex needs who require additional case management to be able to successfully adjust to a SIL placement.

SIL placements in the Austin area include:

- Supervised Independent Living with Enhanced Case Management Services: SAFE Alliance (Austin, dorm style and apartments)
- Supervised Independent Living: Upbring (Austin, apartments); Central Texas Table of Grace (Round Rock, apartments)

By comparison, the Houston area lists 10 SIL programs in the community and one at a college campus, and the San Antonio area lists five SIL programs in the community and two at college campuses.[xx]

In our interviews, DFPS staff reported that about 400 SIL beds are available across Texas, and on average 250 to 350 youth are placed in SIL programs. On any given day, there are between 60 to 100 beds open statewide. According to DFPS, reasons for not filling beds include SIL requirements that pose a barrier for some youth, the location, or the type of housing available. Youth may have connections, employment, or school in an area where no SIL placements are available, or they may want to live in an apartment, which is harder to find.

Provider Perspectives

The following findings are based on interviews with the DFPS Transitional Living Services Division and providers of TLP and SIL programs and other transitional living services in the Austin metro area. Interviews surfaced four themes: assessment of youth readiness and eligibility for extended foster care programs, intensive efforts to support the development of independent living skills, support for creating a sense of belonging and community, and concerns about the transition out of extended foster care.

Youth Readiness and Eligibility for SIL and TLP Programs

SIL is intended for young adults who meet the general requirements for Extended Foster Care and "demonstrate a reasonable level of maturity and ability to manage the expectations required in a SIL setting with no daily supervision and minimal case management."[xxi] As a DFPS staff member described below, when considering a young person's application for SIL, they need to weigh their need for housing with their maturity, ability to comply with requirements, and safety of the living situation.

> *'We're not looking for perfect people. We love the idea of Housing First. We try to be as Housing First as possible. We can't, by nature of our job, fully get there because we have to consider things, like the safety of the other young people that are gonna be in these programs. We make assessments while trying to be as open and Housing-First minded as possible." - DFPS Staff*

SIL applications are completed by youth together with their Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) worker and reviewed by the SIL coordinator. Reviews consider the youth's statement, the caregiver's or staff member's evaluation, placement history, and case notes. In addition, the SIL provider conducts a thorough review of records and interviews the youth. When deciding whether a young person is a good fit for their program, providers describe a multi-layered process to differentiate potential biases based on past incidents and challenging behaviors from present issue they need to address.

> *'We're all asking ourselves, which lens are we using here. No one person makes decisions around placement. There are multiple layers [in reviewing the application]. [We] look and pull apart from what is biased language in here? What is the actual diagnosis?"- Provider 1*

SIL programs offering shared housing conduct a thorough risk assessment when it comes to behaviors that could endanger others in an unsupervised

setting, such as a history of sexual aggression or sex trafficking. Providers look for a fair assessment that does not perpetuate past diagnoses or labels and considers a young person's growth.

> *'We're having a really hard time placing those that have sexual aggression in their history. We're really having a hard time finding a safe way, and even a way to assess it. There's not a lotta clinicians, there's not a lot of tools that will assess whether a person is at risk to act out in that way again. There's very, very little. We are really challenged with how do we look at that now? This young adult is 19, and this happened when they were 13. How do we assess where they are now?" - Provider 2*

There is, however, a perception among advocates that a young person's history of challenging behaviors and placement disruptions make it difficult for them to be considered for TLP or SIL programs.

> *'Previous CPS history is being used against them. How they behave should not be a determining factor if they should get housing or not, but that's what's happening. There is a process in which agencies will determine after an interview if you are a good fit. If there is not an agency that thinks you're a good fit, then you're gonna still be homeless until there is an agency that will not look at your past record. I think it's unfair." - Provider 3*

Independent Living Skills

As outlined above and emphasized by a DFPS staff member below, all youth in extended care or wanting to return to extended care need to meet and maintain the eligibility requirements regarding education and employment.

> *'To be in extended foster care, you do have to either be working or going to school or doing something that's addressing overcoming barriers to one of those things. That doesn't mean you have to have a job or be enrolled in school the second you return [to extended care], but you do generally have 30 days after you return to establish that eligibility. You have to maintain that eligibility. You can't just not be doing anything and utilize extended foster care." – DFPS Staff*

While these requirements are easy for some, they present hurdles for others. According to providers, young people with borderline cognitive functioning, behavioral challenges, and previous placements in residential treatment centers struggle the most and require intensive support and case management. These include youth who seek to reenter foster care, as demonstrated in the below anecdote from a provider.

'We have a youth that really struggled with getting a job. He's borderline cognitive functioning. It's really been a struggle. I knew him from a previous placement, and then he went back with mom, and that didn't work out. He ended up calling me. He was living in the park. We got him back into extended care and got him into our program, we helped him to get a bank account, and a driver's license, and we gave him the car, and teaching him a lot with life skills, and interview skills, and helping him with his resume, cooking skills, cleaning skills." - Provider 2

Providers also find that youth who step down from intensive and restrictive residential treatment centers (RTCs) are not prepared to handle independent living tasks. RTCs tend to reward behavioral compliance, which does not translate easily to taking agency in daily lives, planning for the future, and handling everyday tasks such as job interviews, medical appointments, or transportation. In some instances, youth do not have the required documents to apply for work and therefore cannot meet the employment requirement.

'We see a lot of soon-to-be 18 [year olds] stepping down from residential treatment centers. Not having been given the experience to move freely, sometimes even within the building, let alone navigate transportation or employment. We see a real gap in readiness. For example, there's a young person who came to our program yesterday who does not have their ID or social security card. There's no way they can go get a job that will be safe for them, number one. We're putting them in a position to be exploited in order to maintain shelter." - Provider 1

SIL settings with Enhanced Case Management seek to address barriers in meeting eligibility requirements so youth can continue in the program and be safely housed. SIL providers approach this challenge by helping youth obtain legal documents; designing curricula such as financial literacy classes and enrichment activities that are tailored to the young adult's needs; and advocating with DFPS to count these onsite skill building activities toward the extended care requirements.

'Our challenge to meet that extended care requirement of working or going to school 80 hours a month. What we really see is essentially a lot of enhanced case management. We're just workin' real fast right away to kinda identify those barriers that we see." - Provider 1

Belonging and Lasting Supportive Relationships

While much of the discussion about SIL programs centers on building skills for independence, providers also emphasized the need for fostering a sense

of belonging and connection. Lasting supportive relationships, or relational permanency, are crucial for any young person managing the transition to independence and for long-term wellbeing.

> *'I think one thing that we don't talk a lot about too is that sense of belonging. I think a lotta times we talk about life skills, and I know that's a big topic in our program development too. [...] I think loneliness is so prevalent among this population, kids just don't have anyone. They don't feel any belonging with being moved around so much." - Provider 1*

Providers notice that youth tend to become attached to staff, caseworkers, and the place they live, but placements inevitably come to an end. SIL providers approach the need for belonging and lasting connections in different ways, such as by emphasizing peer support, community, or a family-style environment.

> *'I do really believe in [...] building a community. We have one alumni specialist that had the lived experience of being in care and leads a drop-in every Wednesday on this campus for clients in our current SIL, and any client in the community that is need of resources, case management, basic needs. Their approach tends to be from a space of lived experience. They don't make decisions about who comes and goes, or stays or discharges, or hold power the way that I do, right? [People] don't gotta go to school or work 80 hours a month in order for their peer support team to work for them. Immediately, that team is not threatening to take anything away." - Provider 1*

Another SIL provider noted that they work toward creating a family environment and close connections with the youth that continue after they leave the placement.

> *'That's kind of how I envisioned the program. I do have quite a close connection. I see these kids in my free time. They come to my family's house for dinner. They've met my family. Not all of them, the ones that have been interested 'cause every kid's doin' their own thing, but the ones that have needed that connection. We're still helping, whether they're in the program or not. [...] Some of them, they just get lonely sometimes. 'Hey, can I come for lunch?" 'Of course you can come on over." - Provider 2*

Transition Out of Extended Care

Ideally, SIL providers plan early on to support youth as they exit the program. Voucher programs designed for youth with history in foster care (see the

following section of this report) can provide rental assistance and housing stability and be a next step for youth if they are ready to live independently. Providers work to ensure a smooth transition and consider waiting periods for housing vouchers, so youth do not become homeless after leaving SIL. However, SIL providers also express caution not to push youth prematurely into living independently.

> *'Right now, two of the youth that exited our program are taking advantage of the housing voucher. They got apartments nearby that accept the voucher. They're taking advantage of that, and they are working, and doing their thing. The two that have recently graduated from our program are doing very well." - Provider 2*

Another provider shared:

> *'We really wanna make sure that we start on time by identifying what housing is gonna be most safe and appropriate for each youth. A lot of times they are looking to move into that FYI housing voucher more quickly. That doesn't always line up with when maybe we would think they'd be most ready. You can be a survivalist and be independent and have a housing voucher, and still really have no idea what to do if you can't pay your phone bill, or if your light bill comes up higher than what you've budgeted for". - Provider 4*

Youth Interviews

Among interview participants there were four young adults who either currently lived or had lived in extended foster care, and in an out-of-care residential transitional living program. The interviews demonstrate how youth thrived and sometimes struggled in SIL programs. All four youth encountered periods of housing insecurity and homelessness, either before, between, or after extended care placements.

Sheila: 'I was informed about extended care and did some research."

Sheila[1] successfully moved through the transition process with her Circle of Support, a series of youth-led planning meetings that help youth develop a transition plan for moving out of care and connect with supportive and caring adults. Sheila first learned about TLP and SIL programs through her Circle of

[1] All names have been changed and identifying details removed to protect the privacy of interviewees.

Support meetings, in addition to doing her own research. For her, SIL provides stability while some hurdles and fears around housing remain.

> *'I know at the age of 16, you start your Circle of Support meeting, and they start talking about PALs and Extended Care, your options and stuff. I was informed about Extended Care and all that and researching about SIL—Supervised Independent Living. I knew long before I even turned 18 that I would have to do extended care since I didn't have much support. I did some research. At the time, my placement had already had a TLP. It was a Transitional Living Placement, so I decided to do that before I came to college, and then I did SIL. All I knew was that as long as I was working or in school, my rent would be paid for. I would have somewhere to lay my head and be safe."*

Sheila's interviews indicated that she is a young adult who excels at long-term planning, takes initiative, and successfully manages college, employment, finances, and living in a college dorm.

> *'I'm pretty good at managing my money. I understood long before that I would need emergency money before I even go to college. I have two scholarships, and I work on campus. The scholarships really help with my finances. Having my little on-campus job also gives me a little extra pocket money to play with, so I don't think it's hard to manage, at least for now."*

While the SIL program provided her with secure housing, she still struggled during times when she had to move between dorms. Without a driver's license, she depended on friends, caseworkers, and the foster care liaison on campus to help with moving her belongings between dorms. This experience heightened her sense of insecurity and her fear of losing everything she could call home.

> *'I was fearful that, at some point, they would just take all my stuff, throw it away, and then I'd be homeless for a couple of days. I was scared because why am I having to beg people to help me move my stuff? When you're a foster care person, the things around you, they're your home. You know what I'm saying? All that I have belongs to me, and they're all mine. To have them all thrown away or taken away from me, it kind of hurts. I don't have perhaps that much stability, but I have my items, and they're mine."*

Alex: 'If I don't get a job, I'll be back on the streets."

Unlike Sheila, Alex did not have a strong Circle of Support. Moving across the state and between placements, he had many caseworkers, seemingly without forming strong connections to any of them. Only recently did he realize that he had more support than he thought.

> *'I had to be with a caseworker for people that are planning to get out of care. Then I had one person and then I had another person, and then recently I had a caseworker, but she's not my caseworker anymore. I came back to the same caseworker I had before her. I'm just staying with her for a while now unless they change me to a different caseworker.'*
>
> *'My team, they would try to help too, but then the people along the way that knew me from different places were like, 'Hey, we're here to help.' I was like, 'Oh, okay.' Along the way, then I just realized, 'Oh, people do care and are here to support me.'"*

His placements included residential treatment centers, group homes, shelters, and an extended foster care placement. As he tells it, "There was a situation," he ended up in the hospital, and was discharged from extended foster care without much of a housing plan. He became homeless and moved from motel to motel before arriving in Austin.

> *I just recently left the system because I didn't have a job and I didn't go to school. They're like, 'Oh, you can't be in the system." I didn't have nowhere to go.*
>
> *I was homeless. They took me to shelter. In a sense, I was like, 'No, I didn't feel safe for the shelter." I got myself a little motel for a couple of days.*
>
> *I kept going to motels. I was like, 'No, I can't." Then I had help along the way with people who were paying for me to stay at a hotel for a little bit. I had a whole bunch of people telling me about it [SIL], and somebody finally got me into here. I just got here.*

The SIL program with Extended Case Management helped to get him back into extended foster care. As Alex describes below, he now has intensive support and is yearning for stability, yet meeting the SIL requirements still looms large in his mind.

> *Now, I'm in SIL in Austin. I have to get a job soon, and I have 30 days to get a job. If not, then I'll be back on the streets. They support me with it. They gave me places. 'Oh, you can look at these places and apply for*

them." I applied for four jobs, like ice cream shops and pizza. How I got an interview on Saturday was by myself. I just went to McDonald's, I applied, and then they said what day would be available to interview. I was like, 'Saturday, 2:00, in person."

I feel like there's more stability, especially now that I am becoming more of an adult, being able to do more stuff my own. I'm pretty much just required to have a job and keep the job and do that, and then I'll be able to stay here until 21. I can leave before 21, but I'm good here to stay until 21. Unless I want to leave before 21.

I'm pretty sure I got more support than I have ever. I didn't even know I have the support.

Jim: 'He pushed me like a coach. I am actually confident to be independent now."

Jim stayed in a TLP and recounted a close relationship with his caseworker who he had known since he was 14 years old. His caseworker, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), and mentors supported him through regular meetings that he likened to coaching sessions.

The most helpful for me was that they was pushing me to stay focused. Even when I didn't answer, sometimes [my caseworker would] knock on the door, 'I know you in here. At least get these things done. Come on." He's like a coach, right? You know how a coach is like, 'Hey, I know you can move faster than that. Come on, I need you to pick up speed." He was just like that. He made it happen, and that's one of the things that really helped me.

Also, what really helped me a lot, was I was having meetings every week—every Tuesday, nonstop. It was all about planning. What can we do in the next month? What goals can we get done? What can we do next week? What goals do we need to accomplish? Is it the driver's license? Is it more classes. The next weekend, is it trying to get your ID or trying to go to school? Anything that I had to do, they would always tell me every Tuesday—just brainstorming. What can we get done, what goals? That's what really helped me. It was pushing.

[My caseworker] really pushed me like a coach, I feel like it really did a big impact on me because I learned, and I built so many good skills to the point where I'm actually confident to be independent now.

Jim worked through all the steps toward independence, becoming a parent along the way, but still encountered homelessness after leaving extended foster care.

Josie: 'Just constantly wondering whether I will have a house over my head."

Josie described the transition out of foster care as overwhelming. She left at age 18 to find her biological mother, a common goal among youth who leave care. However, she was immediately faced with housing insecurity and instability and decided to join an out-of-care residential transitional living program. She is now attending college and planning on getting a master's degree in the near future.

> *I'd say as soon as turning 18 you're faced with instability due to housing. Just constantly wondering like if I will have a house over my head, or if I'll have somewhere to go. I guess just the initial finding somewhere to go.*
>
> *I just turned 18, and just out of the foster care system, and I didn't really have any support directly after that, so I just joined [transitional living program] in order to finish high school. I guess they do a good job of pushing you in the right direction, so, yeah. I have pretty good feelings about it. It was helpful.*

In summary, interviews with youth demonstrated the importance of strong connections to a circle of support and self-advocacy for developing independent living skills, maintaining placements, and reaching a sense of stability. Conversely, the youth who did not perceive strong connections and support struggled in extended foster care and experienced homelessness when their placements disrupted.

Discussion and New Directions

SIL and TLP programs provide many benefits for youth, including case management and coaching while they are working toward independence, connections with a support system, and safe and stable housing without involving a lease. Yet the interviews with DFPS, providers, and youth also highlighted several critical issues in the provision of extended foster care that have spurred conversations about expanding services and considering new approaches.

Increasing Capacity for TLP and SIL with Enhanced Case Management

Current eligibility requirements for extended foster care and especially SIL programs create barriers for some youth, including those with mental and behavioral health concerns, histories of frequent placement changes, and previous placements in residential treatment centers. These youth may drop out of extended care placements because they cannot meet the eligibility requirements or exhibit challenging behaviors and then become homeless without having a transition and housing plan. In many cases, these youth have not had the opportunity to experience and practice agency and decision making in their lives. They need a longer transition period where they can still receive intensive case management, support, and safe housing, while also having more independence and real opportunities for decision-making and learning from mistakes.

State-level data from DFPS show some unused SIL capacity, but there is broad agreement among advocates, providers, and DFPS that additional Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and Supervised Independent Living Programs (SIL) with Enhanced Case Management are needed to support youth who need an interim step before they can successfully live on their own. As one DFPS staff member shared:

> *'For youth who don't have the life skills or preparedness to be there yet, that's where we really need our TLPs, Transitional Living Program. It's a very similar style of living, but there is 24/7 staff there, and they are there to support the youth and help them to develop life skills and to manage the youth relationships. That is where the biggest lack is statewide. We need more people to be willing to provide those type of services to help the youth be ready for things like the SIL, things like housing vouchers, where you're living independently on your own, but you need to be able to be a little more mature." – DFPS Staff*

Unfortunately, some TLPs in Austin and other areas of Texas have closed recently. Inadequate reimbursement rates for TLPs and SIL with Enhanced Case Management may contribute to the lack of providers. While the foster care system in Texas has undertaken a rate modernization process and revision of the service delivery system through Texas Child Centered Care (T3C),[xxii] extended care has been left out of this process. Considering the urgent needs among youth aged 18 and older, reimbursement rates and service packages should be updated to support sufficient capacity for TLPs and SIL programs with Enhanced Case Management across the state.

Facilitating the Return to Foster Care

The right to return to foster care is an important tool in homelessness prevention and intervention for young people who leave the system but realize they cannot make it on their own. PAL workers are responsible for prescreening the young adult and starting the return process, but SIL providers also report being contacted directly by youth who have heard about the program from friends. However, the option to return to foster care is limited by the lack of suitable placements, especially if a youth presents with mental and behavioral health challenges. Increasing the availability of TLPs and SIL programs with Enhanced Case Management would allow more youth to return to foster care. This is especially important as we identified that 39% of homeless youth who report foster care involvement when taking the Coordinated Assessment in Austin/Travis County are younger than 21 and potentially eligible to reenter care.

Developing Flexible Out-of-Care Housing Programs Based on a Housing First Approach

Regardless of mental and behavioral health issues and other challenges that may make it difficult for youth to meet extended care eligibility requirements, youth need housing and support for their wellbeing. Not all youth want to stay in extended foster care, especially if they distrust the system, have a history of adversarial relationships, and long to take control of their lives.[xxiii] Therefore, there is also a need for transitional housing programs outside of the child welfare system. These programs, not subject to the federal guidelines for extended foster care, should adopt a Housing First and harm reduction approach that would align with best practices in homeless prevention and intervention, and allow for flexibility in meeting the needs of youth. For example, some youth may benefit from an intensive skill building program, while others may need emergency or gap housing that gives them time to stabilize and rethink their transition and housing plan. As one youth interviewee shared:

> *'I think that one thing that would help with housing instability or homelessness when transitioning out of foster care is being set up with some kind of stipend or some sort of resource that would help you get on your feet, even if there was just a transitioning home or a group home where young adults can go for maybe a few months until they get a place to stay." - Josie*

Fostering Connections and Relational Permanency

Interviews with both youth and providers demonstrated the importance of ongoing supportive relationships. Unsurprisingly, youth with strong relationships to caseworkers and their Circle of Support and youth who understood how to navigate their resources were also more successful in participating in programs, living independently, and achieving wellbeing and stability. Providers emphasized the importance of building peer support and lasting relationships to improve the longtime wellbeing of youth. Strategies for fostering connections and relational permanency should be integrated with transition and housing plans and throughout extended care placements.

Summary

- Extended care programs are an important tool in preventing homelessness and promoting stability among transition-aged youth.
- While there is currently unused capacity in Supervised Independent Living (SIL) programs across the state, there is a capacity gap in the Austin area for Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and SIL programs with Enhanced Case Management that can provide intensive support for those youth who need to develop independent living and relationship skills and who are at the highest risk for experiencing homelessness after leaving foster care.
- Adequate funding is needed to increase capacity for TLP and SIL programs with Extended Case Management. Extended foster care programs should be included in the ongoing efforts of foster care rate modernization and revision of service delivery packages.
- Additionally, there is a need for out-of-care gap housing and transitional housing programs that can adopt a Housing First and harm reduction approach for youth who either do not want to stay in foster care or cannot be adequately served through the foster care system.

Intervening with Homelessness through FYI and FUP Voucher Programs

Background: HUD Requirements for FYI and FUP Voucher Programs

Among available rental assistance and voucher programs, the Family Unification Program and Foster Youth to Independence Initiative specifically support youth with experience in foster care. These are special purpose vouchers administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of Public Housing Voucher Programs.

The Family Unification Program (FUP) started in 1990 and provides Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) to two different populations:[xxiv]

1. Families for whom the lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in:
   a. The imminent placement of the family's child or children in out-of-home care, or
   b. The delay in the discharge of the child or children to the family from out-of-home care.
2. Youth at least 18 years and not more than 24 years of age (have not reached their 25th birthday) who left foster care, or will leave foster care within 90 days, and are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless. Eligibility is not limited to single persons. Pregnant and/or parenting youth are eligible to receive assistance.

The Foster Youth to Independence Initiative (FYI) Voucher program[xxv] was created in 2019 to expand the availability of housing assistance to youth with a history in foster care. HUD found that this youth population was underserved under FUP, as most of the vouchers and funding went to families rather than youth. There is no time limit on FUP vouchers issued to families. FUP and FYI vouchers issued to youth are limited to 36 months unless youth meet the requirements to receive an extension of assistance for up to an additional 24 months by enrolling in HUD's Family Self Sufficiency Program or a similar program. Both programs require a partnership between a Public Housing Authority (PHA) and a Public Child Welfare Agency (PCWA). The PCWA is responsible for verifying that families and youth have past or current child welfare involvement and makes referrals to the PHA. The PHA determines eligibility for rental assistance and places the family or youth on the waiting list for FUP and FYI vouchers in the order the referral is received.

In addition, supportive services must be provided to youth for the duration of the voucher program.

An audit of the FYI program[xxvi] in its early stages of implementation found that in April 2022, the overall FYI voucher utilization rate was only 31%, far lower than the 77% utilization rate for FUP vouchers and the 88% utilization rate for traditional Housing Choice Vouchers in the same time frame. This audit found barriers to FYI voucher utilization including 1) poor referral coordination between PHAs and PCWAs; 2) lack of documentation of supportive services for youth to successfully apply for vouchers, navigate housing options, and successfully move in; and 3) age limitations in supportive services provided under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, which can only be used for youth up to age 21. The auditors recommended that the FYI voucher program 1) increase coordination between PHAs, PCWAs, and third parties partners to improve voucher utilization and limit barriers to leasing; 2) require PHAs to document that they informed FYI participants at program entry of their eligibility for supportive services for the duration of the program; and 3) require PHAs to obtain PCWA certification that the PCWA will provide or secure access to supportive services for each youth in the program.

In the current iteration of the program, PHAs applying for FYI vouchers are encouraged to provide multiple avenues for young people to be identified and referred to the voucher program. Third-party partners, including organizations serving homeless youth or the local Continuum of Care (CoC), can assist in the identification of eligible youth, particularly those who may have already exited foster care and are seeking emergency shelter or other assistance from homeless services providers.[xxvii] The CoC Program, designed to promote communitywide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness and facilitate access to programs by homeless individuals and families (as defined by HUD), can play an important role in increasing utilization of FYI vouchers.

Based on findings and recommendations from the early stages of the FYI program, HUD requires the following partnership agreements to be documented in a Memorandum of Understanding between PHA, PCWA, and if applicable, third parties.[xxviii]

PHA Responsibilities

1. Upon receipt of a referral(s) from the PCWA of an eligible youth, compare the name(s) with youth already on the PHA's HCV waiting list. Any youth on the PHA's HCV waiting list that matches with the PCWA's referral must be assisted in order of their position on the waiting list in

accordance with PHA admission policies. Any youth certified by the PCWA as eligible and not on the HCV waiting list must be placed on the waiting list (pending HCV eligibility determination).

2. Document that youth are informed of their eligibility for supportive services and the duration of the availability of those services.
3. Amend the administrative plan in accordance with applicable program regulations and requirements.

PCWA Responsibilities

1. Have a system for identifying eligible youth within the agency's caseload and review referrals from the PHA and third-party partners.
2. Have a system for prioritization of referrals to ensure that youth are prioritized for a FYI voucher based upon level of need and appropriateness of the intervention. Prioritization must be designed in a way that is consistent with fair housing and civil rights requirements and does not discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex, disability, family status, or national origin.
3. Provide written certification to the PHA that a youth is eligible.
4. Provide or secure a commitment for the provision of required supportive services.

Third-Party Responsibilities [to be included if a third-party will be party to the agreement]

1. Integrate the prioritization and referral process for eligible youth into the third-party or CoC's coordinated entry process.
2. Identify services to be provided using third party or CoC program funds to youth who qualify for third-party or CoC program assistance.
3. Make referrals of eligible youth to the PCWA.

Supportive Services

1. Basic life skills information/counseling on money management, use of credit, housekeeping, proper nutrition/meal preparation, and access to health care (e.g., doctors, medication, and mental and behavioral health services).
2. Counseling on compliance with rental lease requirements and with HCV program participant requirements, including assistance/referrals for assistance on security deposits, utility hook-up fees, and utility deposits.
3. Providing such assurances to owners of rental property as are reasonable and necessary to assist a FYI-eligible youth to rent a unit with a voucher.

4. Job preparation and attainment counseling (where to look/how to apply, dress, grooming, relationships with supervisory personnel, etc.).
5. Educational and career advancement counseling regarding attainment of general equivalency diploma (GED); attendance/financing of education at a technical school, trade school or college; including successful work ethic and attitude models.

FYI and FUP Voucher Utilization in DFPS Region 7

DFPS has put effort statewide behind the FUP and FYI housing voucher programs. At the time of this report, DFPS had entered into 39 MOU partnerships with PHAs for FYI vouchers, in addition to 16 MOU partnerships with PHAs for FUP vouchers.

DFPS supports these programs with a Housing Specialist in the Transitional Living Services Division at the state office and designated regional youth housing liaisons as local points of contact. Notably, because voucher programs are administered by the local public housing authorities and each region has different resources and support networks, voucher administration can look different across different areas of the state. This makes it challenging when sharing information about the program, clarifying the flow of voucher administration, and tracking engagement of partners.

LifeWorks is contracted to provide After Care Transitional Services for youth in Region 7. These services are available for youth between the ages of 17 and 21 and include wrap-around case management and support with education, housing, and employment opportunities. After Care Transitional Services are typically leveraged to comply with the supportive services requirement for FYI and FUP vouchers.

Tables 5 and 6 show FYI and FUP vouchers and their utilization for selected public housing authorities within DFPS Region 7 that participated in our needs assessment. Table 5 shows utilization rates for FUP vouchers that are based on the HUD dashboard[xxix], which is updated monthly.

Table 5: FUP Awards and Leasing Rates as of July 2024 for Selected Public Housing Authorities in Region 7

PHA	DFPS Region	FUP Total Effective Awards	FUP Total Leased	FUP% Leasing
Housing Authority of the City of Austin	7B	160	141	88%
Travis County Housing Authority	7B	72	35	49%
Round Rock Housing Authority	7A	9	3	33%
Housing Authority of Taylor	7A	0	0	n/a
Central Texas Council of Governments	7A	15	6	40%
Brazos Valley Council of Governments	7A	18	2	11%
Housing Authority of the City of Waco	7A	7	9	129%
Statewide		1,397	1,039	74%
Nationally				77.51%

Note: These data are based on the HUD dashboard that is updated monthly.

Data for FYI vouchers are not publicly available through a HUD dashboard. We therefore based the information in Table 6 on interviews with the public housing authorities. It should be noted that while Table 6 shows the number of vouchers leased at the time of the interviews, additional vouchers may have been issued to youth who were still in the housing search process and had not yet signed a lease.

Table 6: FYI Awards and Leasing Rates as of August 2024 for Selected Public Housing Authorities in Region 7

PHA	DFPS Region	FYI Total Effective Awards	FYI Total Leased	FYI % Leasing	Premature exits
Housing Authority of the City of Austin	7B	75	58	77%	6%
Travis County Housing Authority	7B	0	n/a	n/a	n/a

PHA	DFPS Region	FYI Total Effective Awards	FYI Total Leased	FYI % Leasing	Premature exits
Round Rock Housing Authority*	7A	25	10	20%	Information not available
Housing Authority of Taylor*	7A	25			
Brazos Valley Council of Governments	7A	15	2	13%	Information not available
Housing Authority of the City of Waco	7A	25	9	36%	0%

Note: These data are based on interviews with public housing authorities conducted in August 2024.

* Round Rock and Taylor Housing Authorities each have 25 FYI vouchers, but vouchers are administered jointly across both entities.

Tables 5 and 6 provide a snapshot of FUP and FYI voucher utilization and show that FYI voucher utilization in each area is below FUP voucher utilization, and that there are significant differences in FYI voucher utilization between areas. Most importantly, the FYI voucher program is administered in different ways. In Austin/Travis County, the PHA and DFPS have entered an MOU that includes the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program as a third-party partner. Referrals for vouchers and supportive services are coordinated through the CoC. In all other areas of Region 7, DFPS makes referrals for vouchers directly to the PHA. Community partners are involved in referrals and supportive services to a varying, but lesser degree. The next sections of the report describe and compare the voucher administration process north of Austin (Region 7A) with the voucher administration in Austin/Travis County (Region 7B).

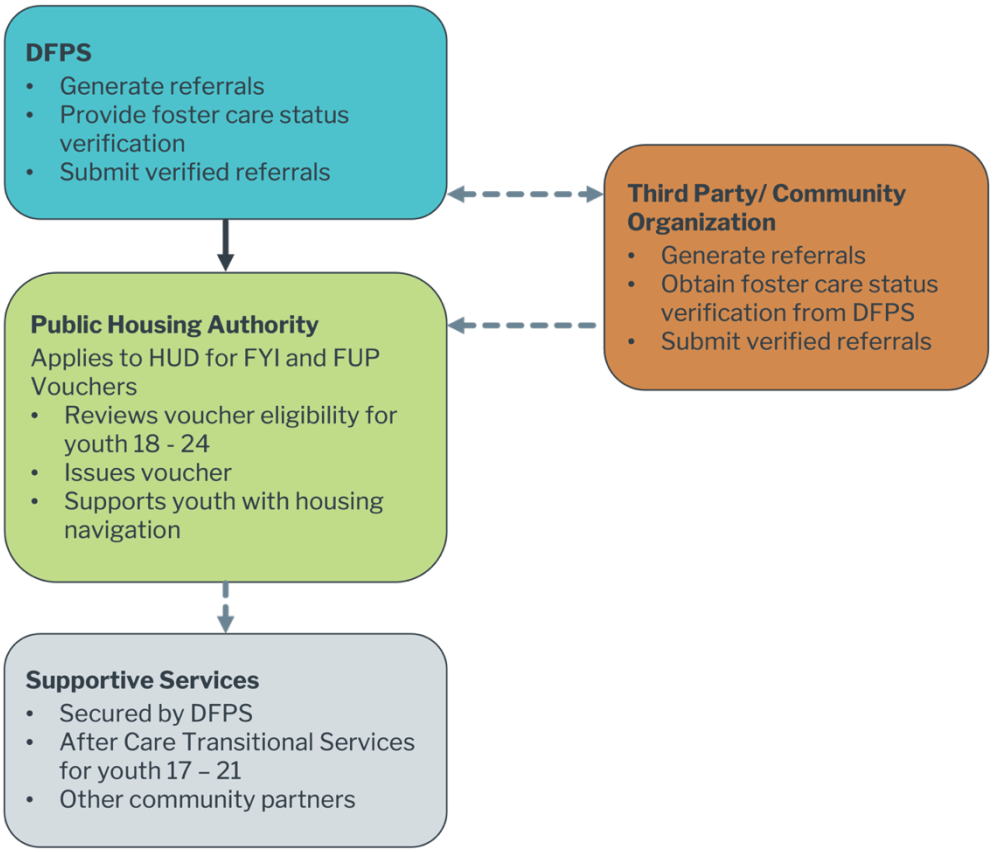
Provider Perspectives on FYI Voucher Administration in Region 7A

The following description and analysis of the FYI and FUP voucher administration is based on interviews with Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) in Travis County,[2] Round Rock, Taylor, Brazos Council of Governments, and Waco. All PHAs receive direct referrals for the voucher programs from DFPS,

[2] The PHA of Travis County is separate from the PHA of the City of Austin. At the time of the interview, Travis County followed a similar voucher administration process as the other PHA's in this group.

and some include community partners. The FYI and FUP voucher administration process for Region 7A is visually summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Flowchart for FYI and FUP Voucher Administration in Region 7A



Themes emerging from interviews with PHAs about voucher administration and utilization in Region 7A echo findings from the audit of the FYI voucher program in 2022.[xxx]. PHAs note a small number of referrals, a lack of community collaboration, and limited supportive services. The PHAs are currently working with DFPS to improve voucher utilization and are seeking to broaden the referral pathways, increase collaboration with youth-serving organizations and homeless coalitions, and secure supportive services.

Strategies for Broadening Referral Pathways

Some Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) rely exclusively on DFPS for referrals, which works well for youth who are on the DFPS caseload and are at risk of becoming homeless upon leaving care. PHAs also note that these youth tend to be very young, between 18 to 19 years old. For the few youths who are referred, the vouchers appear to be a stable housing option. However, youth who experience homelessness and are no longer connected with DFPS are left out of the referral pathway.

Other PHAs seek to broaden referral pathways by initiating collaborations with community organizations that serve youth aging out of foster care and homeless youth. PHAs working with homeless service providers note they have no easy way of identifying young adults with histories in foster care among those who are accessing services, as this information is not systematically tracked by providers. For all referrals originating from community providers, DFPS will then verify foster care status. As one PHA staff member shared:

> *'There is an organization, they have strictly homeless youth. I think the barrier there was that they couldn't refer anyone to me. The referrals only can go through DFPS, and, I wanna say maybe three months ago, it was put out to me that anybody can refer them, as long as that agency ran their information through DFPS to make sure they are aged out of foster care." -PHA 3*

Resources for Providing Supportive Services

Interviewees also noted other barriers to voucher utilization, including difficulties with housing navigation, financial support for youth to lease and move into a unit, and case management throughout the duration of the voucher program. Most PHAs have a designated housing specialist working with the youth until they move into housing. PHAs do not appear to be aware of or connected with any other supportive services the youth may receive. PHA staff members describe intensive, individual support for the youth to work through the application process and navigate housing choices, with one staff member sharing:

> *'I immediately contact them. I try to do it the same day, because I could imagine, as a youth, I'm already being separated from family, and now I'm being told, okay, you gotta go. I'm callin' 'em, I'm emailin' 'em. 'Hey, what's goin' on? What type of income do you have?*
> *I'm issuing them a voucher ASAP. For different reasons—their voucher is expirin', or I lose contact with a lot of 'em. I do have that issue as well. I do lose contact." -PHA 1*

The PHAs noted that youth are easily overwhelmed with the application and housing navigation process. In the process, some youth will "fade away" or find other opportunities even though the designated housing specialist may do their utmost to support the youth.

> *'Sometimes they tend to get overwhelmed and just want to back out and not go through that stressful situation. I meet with them one-on-one. I*

explain the program, and I try to let them know that I'm here for them, and it's gonna go smoothly as long as we just keep the open communication. It's more been an issue with them just getting overwhelmed and not wanting to take the next step to get where they need to go, or they find housing with a friend or somewhere else, and then they decide that they don't wanna do housing." -PHA 2

Other barriers occur in the housing search and include landlords not accepting vouchers, youth not having a credit history or a guarantor, and youth lacking the funds to pay a security deposit. Additional support through the Housing Stability Services Program has allowed PHAs to cover security deposits, application fees, and other move-in expenses and resulted in a small increase in the number of youth who have been successfully housed with FYI vouchers.

The provision of supportive services is required as part of the FYI voucher program. When setting up the MOU with public housing authorities, DFPS lists the local structures that can meet the supportive service requirements. Typically, After Care Transitional Services (ACTS) for youth between the ages of 17 to 21 are leveraged to meet the voucher requirements. LifeWorks is contracted to provide After Care Transitional Services across all of Region 7 (7A and 7B), but PHAs and DFPS note that capacity for supportive services is stretched thin, especially for those youth 21 to 24 years old, and that additional community partnerships are necessary to fill the gaps. One DFPS staff member noted:

'I'll tell you, one of the fallbacks that we've experienced regarding housing vouchers is that DFPS and also LifeWorks works with our youth up until the age of 21. That's what we have contracted with them. Housing vouchers for the FYI can go up to 24 years of age. There's that gap between 21 to 24 because with the housing vouchers, they need to be receiving some type of hands-on casework to help navigate things during their transition into the voucher. That's in our MOU with the housing authorities is that they receive—now, LifeWorks does work with youth after the age of 21, but it's very limited. We need some more community partners coming to the circle, besides LifeWorks, who will help fill the need for the casework up until the age of 24". -DFPS Staff

Community Data to Support Strategic Planning

Regional and community data on youth aging out of care, youth homelessness, and available housing options are needed to fully understand why voucher utilization rates are low. PHAs noted in-care housing options that were available in their community and more desirable for youth than

housing vouchers. Others noted that their community was not very attractive for youth due to limited support, transportation, and employment opportunities. Some PHAs perceived an urgency around youth homelessness but had no information on how many of these homeless youth might be eligible for FYI or FUP vouchers. Without better data, communities across Texas cannot effectively assess and address the housing needs of youth leaving the foster care system.

> *'There is [this SIL program] here that will house youth that are comin' out of foster care, buy them a car, pay their bills, for as long as they need, to become self-sufficient. The reason, I would say, why we are not fully leased up at 25 would be who's gonna pass up a ready-made apartment, fully-furnished, a vehicle?" -PHA 3*
>
> *'We sometimes find that the young people don't want to move out to our area because it's too far out. There are limited resources. There's no transportation. It's hard for them to get a job, kind of thing. That's the other challenge. They have to have some source of income to support themselves, even though we're helping them with a rental subsidy." -PHA 4*

Collaboration and Coordination at the Community Level

While PHAs and DFPS are taking first steps to increase community collaboration, more robust coordination will be needed to improve voucher utilization. Presentations in the community may increase awareness of the voucher program, but as a PHA staff member described below may not result in obtaining referrals.

> *'That's been my recent idea. I've put out the word [to the homeless coalition]. We have about 20 nonprofits that come to those meetings to let them know we have these available vouchers, but no one has sent any referrals." -PHA 4*

Effective community coordination may include a taskforce or coalition on addressing homelessness among youth, regularly scheduled meetings, a dashboard with updates on availability of housing vouchers, clarification on eligibility and referral pathways for the FYI and FUP voucher programs, and training for PHA staff, DFPS caseworkers and PAL workers, and service providers. These strategies could also serve to connect, inform, and train stakeholders in the face of inevitable staff turnover that interferes with smooth and timely voucher administration.

Provider Perspectives on FYI Voucher Administration in Austin/Travis County

At the time of this report, the Housing Authority for the City of Austin had 75 effective FYI vouchers, out of which 58 vouchers (77%) were currently leased. Overall, in Fiscal Year 2024, 21 FYI vouchers were awarded to new participants who successfully moved into a unit. Additional vouchers had been approved for youth who were still in the housing search but had not yet signed a lease.

The following description and analysis of the FYI voucher administration in Austin is based on interviews with staff at DFPS, ECHO, the Housing Authority for the City of Austin, and providers. In addition, we reviewed policies and practices pertaining to FYI voucher administration in Austin/Travis County. The voucher administration process in Austin/Travis County is also summarized in Figure 6.

Continuum of Care (CoC) and Coordinated Entry

In Austin/Travis County, FYI and FUP vouchers are administered through the Coordinated Entry process under the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program, which is led by ECHO. The Coordinated Entry (CE) process is open to all individuals and families in Austin/Travis County experiencing literal homelessness (HUD Category 1), which means they are living in the street or in a place not meant for human habitation, and to people who are actively fleeing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking (HUD Category 4). CE participants may not be screened out of the process due to perceived barriers to housing or services, and CE programs must ensure equal access to CE regardless of the person's sexual orientation, or marital status, and in accordance to the person's gender identity and/or expression.[xxxi] There are no active CoC prevention programs, so the CE is currently unavailable to individuals and families at risk of homelessness.

Prioritization of Youth for FYI and FUP Voucher Programs Through the Coordinated Assessment

Homeless individuals complete the Coordinated Assessment and are prioritized according to their score on the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT), a self-report questionnaire consisting of 21 items that ask about the individual; the number of children in their household; their current episode and history of homelessness; their physical, mental, and behavioral health; their experience with violence, and barriers to housing (Appendix C). Proponents of the Coordinated Assessment emphasize that this process

ensures accountability so that resources, including FYI and FUP vouchers, go to the next most vulnerable person as determined by their APAT score rather than their connections to a referral entity. As one PHA staff member shared:

> *'The coordinated entry system identifies who will be referred to the [FYI or FUP] program as opposed to DFPS. The coordinated entry system is grounded in race equity [and] helps maintain that integrity. This system has accountability. I think that's one of the most important things about coordinated entry is it doesn't give you room to shy away. We find the people who are least likely to resolve their homelessness without assistance." -PHA 5*

Verification of Foster Care Status

Verification of foster care history through DFPS occurs immediately after a youth has completed the Coordinated Assessment. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) administrator at ECHO identifies new youth who self-report foster care involvement and then sends the list to DFPS to verify eligibility for FYI and FUP vouchers. Verification of foster care status is tracked in the HMIS data base. ECHO staff described this process as follows:

> *'That's just so we can keep HMIS most up to date with whether or not they do have DFPS history. It's just there. When we do staff a youth in the future, service providers can see that they're eligible for the vouchers. If they are specifically pulling for a voucher, we can go based off of that category on the list. 'Oh, yeah, they're FYI eligible or they're FUP eligible," and so forth. When the case managers are ready, they begin the paperwork with them for the voucher." - ECHO Staff*

Supportive Services

The Austin/Travis County CoC has MOUs with providers who agree to follow CoC policies and demonstrate that they can provide the supportive services required by HUD (see MOU requirements on page 39). Currently, the primary service providers for young adults in Austin/Travis County are LifeWorks, the SAFE Alliance, and Caritas. However, new providers can apply to the CoC as well. Providers agree to enroll the clients in services that are prioritized through the Coordinated Assessment. This process ensures that for every referral to a voucher program, there is also a referral to supportive services. The CoC's coordinated entry process addresses weaknesses that were identified in the national audit of the FYI voucher program[xxxii] as well as by PHAs outside of Austin that rely on direct referrals from DFPS and do not

have strong third-party partners to provide supportive services. As one PHA staff member stated:

> *'The system identifies the people who are in the eligible age range, and then coordinated entry pairs the young people with a service provider. Nine times out of 10 it's LifeWorks who leverages their programs to provide the services and leans on the voucher for the rental assistance. If the next most vulnerable youth can be connected to another service provider, we just look to the coordinated entry system to make that match. There are FYI clients connected to SAFE, our local DV provider, the primary one anyway. If there's someone sitting there who's next on the list or can be slid into a voucher off our Rapid Rehousing Program to help leverage the Rapid Rehousing Program to serve the next most vulnerable person, then [we will do that]" -PHA 5*

Referral for Services and Programs

Referrals to programs occur when a provider has a unit or service available and informs ECHO of the opening. ECHO is then responsible for identifying the highest priority participant who is presumed eligible and interested in that opening based on their assessment information. This process is facilitated through closed, individualized case staffings that coordinate housing and support services across multiple potential community service providers. Due to the volume of people entering the homeless response system and specific needs of youth, staffings occur both for the general population and separately for the youth population, ages 18 to 25. Separating youth from the general population also takes into consideration that youth are likely to have lower APAT scores due to fewer episodes of homelessness or chronic health problems. Staffings are held bi-weekly and are attended by providers, along with ECHO and the PHA.

During the first meeting, or prioritization meeting, providers report their capacity to enroll or "pull" individuals into their programs, which include rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing, FUP and FYI voucher programs, and other transitional housing options. Prioritization meetings typically focus on the top 10 to 20 individuals in order of their APAT score and determine who is eligible for which program based on their scores and verification of foster care status. Once a participant's presumptive eligibility information has been shared with a provider, the provider is responsible for contacting the participant to inform them of their services and to set an enrollment date within 10 days. ECHO policies guide outreach and engagement of youth until they are successfully enrolled in services.[xxxiii]

The prioritization meeting is followed by a second meeting, the case staffing, to discuss active cases until youth are housed. Providers emphasize the importance of having a space for case managers to troubleshoot, support each other, and learn how others have helped clients with similar history. Ultimately, case staffing also enhance accountability in the system and ensure providers do not walk away from challenging cases or drop participants if they are at risk of losing their housing. Staff from the PHA and ECHO describe the importance of regular in-person staffings as follows:

> *'The purpose really is accountability. We're doing these in person, which is great. It gives opportunity for the direct line staff to share the victories too. Sometimes the update is they were housed last week, and everyone cheers and feels great about our work. It's awesome." - PHA 5*
>
> *'If youth are going through a specific crisis at a time during case management, it's just nice to see [provider] understand that and not wanna give up on a youth so easily once they are referred to a housing program." - ECHO Staff*

Voucher Eligibility Assessed at the PHA

Program prioritization and eligibility are separate criteria. Prioritization refers to the order in which eligible participants will be referred to a program based on community-wide standards of relative need. Eligibility refers to limitations on who can be accepted to a program based on the program's funding sources and other mandated or adopted qualifying criteria.

After DFPS verifies eligibility of 18- to 24-year-olds for FYI and FUP vouchers (i.e., history in foster care), the PHA determines whether the youth meet other HUD eligibility criteria, such as income guidelines. There is no minimum income requirement. The PHA is committed to reducing barriers to housing to the extent possible and will only deny housing to people for HUD-mandated criminal convictions. Unfortunately, HUD vouchers cannot be used to assist an individual who is undocumented.

Housing Search and Navigation

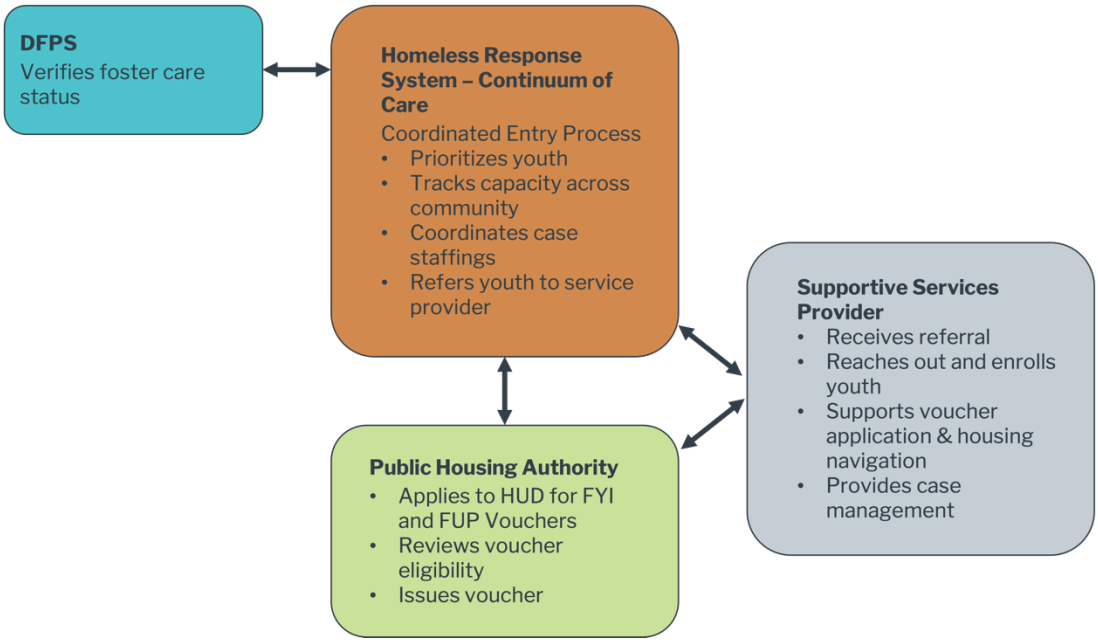
Every voucher comes with a 120-day search period that can be extended by 30 days. The provider below describes their case management process that was designed to place youth in housing faster and ensure youth are connected and have somebody who is checking in on a regular basis.

> *'When people are in the beginning phases of seeking and then of staying in housing [...] they may see [case manager] more than once a week. [The*

case manager] won't go two weeks, if they can help it, without contacting and communicating and seeing, face to face, their client. We also have created a whole team of housing placement coordinators where they're reaching out to landlords, and they really are building an expert skillset in trying to navigate individuals who may have certain records, certain challenges and barriers to housing to really overcome those." - Provider 4

The FYI and FUP voucher administration process in Austin/Travis County is visually summarized in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Flowchart of FYI and FUP Voucher Administration in Austin/Travis County



Youth Experience with Coordinated Entry Process and Housing Vouchers

Five youth provided insight into their experience with transitioning out of foster care and homelessness and entering housing programs in the Austin area. The youth exited foster care in very different ways, from being reunified with their birth families to aging out at 18 years of age or staying in extended foster care until age 21. After experiencing periods of homelessness, all youth were housed at the time of the interviews. While this small group is not representative of all former foster youth experiencing homelessness in the Austin area, their experiences navigating resources shed a light on the successes and gaps in the homeless response system.

Experiencing Homelessness After Leaving Foster Care

Three of the youth we interviewed—Jessica, Cara, and Erica[3]—had left the foster care system before turning 18 due to being reunified with their birth families. In each case, conflicts erupted, and their living situation became untenable when they were teenagers. At that point, no longer connected to the child welfare system and its resources, Jessica and Cara moved around and experienced homelessness while Erica came into contact with the juvenile justice system. Jessica and Cara, who were the least connected to formal support systems, also experienced the most severe homelessness, sleeping unsheltered and engaging in survival sex.

> *'I got back with my great-grandparents. They came and they got us. Then after that around the age of 12 my mom passed away. Her mom, so my grandma, she adopted us. It wasn't the best outcome with that. Around the age of 15 I left [my grandma's] house, and I [began] sleeping on the streets. At first it started at a bus stop, no tent, no extra clothes, no anything until I starting to go to the Salvation Army. They gave me a tent. I went to sleeping at the park 30 minutes or so away from my grandma's. After that, that's where I was at." -Jessica*
>
> *'[My dad] is not what you would call a responsible adult. He's the reason I am in the system. He went to jail. He got clean. He did his parenting classes. Let's go take [the children] back. How could you do that? It made no sense to me. I left his house like for real. I left his house. I was about 16. The first thing I did was I rode the bus to the east side, found where my mom lived. I don't think it's appropriate to say, but I was sleepin' around to get a place to stay, so I slept around in motels. Back then I had to make a way to provide for myself, I was abused." -Cara*

However, even those youth who aged out of foster care at age 18 or 21 experienced periods of homelessness, in some cases while waiting for a housing program to open. Neither had a viable housing plan that would have helped with a smooth transition and provided stability. Youth described how house-hopping or couch-surfing, while not literal homelessness according to the HUD definition, negatively impacted their wellbeing and work toward employment and housing goals.

For example, Jim stayed in extended foster care until age 21 and engaged a very robust support network, including his DFPS caseworker, CASA, After Care and Transition Services, and mentors. Nevertheless, he encountered

[3] All names have been changed and identifying details removed to protect the privacy of interviewees.

homelessness after leaving extended foster care and was couch-surfing for three to four months before he, his partner, and two small children could enter Rapid Rehousing and obtain a housing voucher. He describes the experience as "depressing," saying it made it difficult for him to focus on long-term goals and engage with the people who were willing to support him.

> *'I was couch surfing—it was pretty bad. I was going from my uncles to my aunt and then to my other [relatives] just back to back. We would be there for a few days, and it would be like we had to leave. One of them was because I had a son at that time, and then my girl was pregnant with my daughter. We had a sense like we didn't feel welcomed, either, like we were bothering, and bothering people's peace at night, too, because my baby, my son, would cry. It just felt bad, and I was just getting depressed and sad. [...] Then the other one was that I was couch surfing, so I couldn't really focus. I couldn't really focus on the team that I had that were trying to help me because I had to focus on, 'Hey, what we're gonna eat today? or, 'Where we're gonna sleep tonight?" That's what it was." -Jim*

Finding Out About Resources and Housing Programs

As the youth describe it, navigating resources in the community is a difficult and time-consuming process. Not only is information hard to come by, especially if you do not have a cell phone, but as Josie says, it takes "*time and having to wait to see if you're either accepted or denied, and [...] and pinpoint which ones are legitimate and which ones aren't*." Youth described information about resources being passed on informally through family and friends and doing their own research online.

> *'I have to go food pantries and other churches, like the Catholic churches to get any assistance. There's resources and stuff. They're all separated and spread out, and they only do certain amount of this and a certain amount of that. There's not many childcare sources besides Texas Work Force, which has a waiting list or a list of schools they're not accepting. It's just like, what do for young moms? There's not really any assistance for the younger crowd of moms." -Cara*
>
> *'A lot of stuff I kinda knew about it already, seeing my mother and family go through certain things already as a young child. I was getting help from people, or maybe from my grandma or somebody, or some people that really knew my situation, that what I was going through then, which was my mother and my grandmother at the time. Sometimes it was just also me, just looking it up online. What happens if you've been through this? Who can help you? Stuff like that. That's what I will look up." -Jessica*

Similarly, when looking for housing programs, youth relied on their own resourcefulness, research, and an informal network of friends and family and peers with lived experience. Youth who were no longer connected with child welfare or other systems faced increased difficulties accessing and evaluating information. Youth also shared experiences of reaching out to providers but being unable to complete the process of finding a place to stay.

> *'Well, I'm very resourceful. I went to the shelter [...]. I went to the shelter, and they helped me out. I stayed there for two months. I guess it stopped me from being homeless at the time. I had to look for that resource." -Naomi*
>
> *'I heard about [provider] from a former homeless person that I was just kicking it with. They reached out to me, and they told me about the youth resource center, if I went in there and I could shower or they'd give me food, clothes. That's how I heard about it." -Jessica*
>
> *'I was calling a few places—"Here, reach out. Reach out to them. Reach out to them." I never got to make it through any, as far as process with any of them people. It was kinda like I just have to call and check in from one place every day." -Erica*
>
> *'I looked online, and they had the housing assessment. [...] I don't know if I'm [eligible for] Section 8, so I was like, well, I'm just gonna go to Sunrise Church. They're like, 'Well, you qualify for the [housing voucher] program." They're doing this little assessment where they'll help you for the next 5 years. I was like, okay, that's cool." -Cara*

Entering the Homeless Response System

The youth who participated in interviews all accessed housing programs in the Austin area via the Coordinated Entry process. Interviews indicated the youth were largely unaware of the process until they happened to find out about assessments at the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center or LifeWorks. Some were frustrated by the process and the language used in the assessment, some felt confused while waiting for a call back or referral, and others felt lucky to meet some of the prioritization criteria. Naomi wished the assessor had better explained the questions and terminology.

> *'There's a thing called a Coordinated Assessment. They just asked a whole bunch of questions. Some of them words that they was saying, I really didn't understand. Then, you'll ask them, and it will seem like they get irritated when you ask them, 'What's this mean?' [...] Then, as the*

person that's asking the questions, [...] you're supposed to explain it, not get an attitude like we're supposed to know what it means." -Naomi

Cara and Jim both wondered whether they would be eligible to take the Coordinated Assessment because they were living in motels or house hopping and were not living in the streets. They became aware that having young children gave them priority and a chance at qualifying for a housing program.

'I had went to the Sunrise Church. I'm so young, I don't have any disabilities, but I do have kids. Of course, that makes like one of those—you have to this or have to have that [to qualify]. I got in the little line 'cause they were like, 'We're lining people up.' I was like, Okay.' They did the assessment. Like where they'll sit you down to ask you a couple questions, like who's all there? How many of you guys? What's the situation living like? Are you in a car? Are you homeless? Do you have a place to be just temporary? Are you livin' with someone? I was like really, technically, I'm in a hotel, but I can't afford it. They're like, 'Okay, we'll just put you on the homeless because a hotel can kick you out anytime they want.' We can walk out the door that day and your stuff be in the lobby the next day. And they were like, 'Yeah, you qualify.' Then the next thing you know, I got a call sayin' I have a caseworker." -Cara

Unlike Cara and Jim who were housed within a few months, Erica was initially placed on the waiting list. While she was couch surfing the abusive relationship with the person she was staying with escalated. At that point she qualified for emergency support and a housing program. She perceived that she was moving ahead on the waitlist and received help only after a major crisis occurred.

'At first, I was just sitting there and waiting and waiting and waiting. I got housed really quick after I got into a domestic violence issue with my person I was with. I just called them again. 'I don't know where I'm at [on the waitlist], but I'm really in need of services.' I felt like what caused them to immediately rush me into my housing was the situation, the domestic situation I was in. That's what sped my process up. Next thing you know, I was housed within a few weeks from that incident that happened. I was technically on y'all waiting list, and then something happened that was major, I got in contact with y'all, and that's what made y'all jump on my housing." -Erica

Beginning the Housing Search

Once youth were referred to a voucher program and connected with a caseworker, they quickly began the housing search. With support from their caseworker, some found housing almost immediately—within a week. Jim described how his caseworker walked him through the whole process.

> *'My caseworker she would tell me, 'Okay, this is your budget because you have a kid. The more kids you have, the bigger voucher you have.' At that time, it was only me and my girl and then the baby. They told me, 'Your voucher is right now, $1350 that we could pay for your month.' I was like, 'Okay, now I know my voucher is how much it is, so I have to find something that's in the budget.' First thing that she would ask, too, is like, 'Well, ask if they accept vouchers because not every place accept vouchers.' That was the first—the second thing, too, that I would ask. Then right after that, she would tell me, 'All right, so they accept vouchers. All right, let's go put an application in.' Then, once we put the application in, we're gonna wait for them to call us. They're like, 'Okay, we want to proceed with getting y'all in here.' All they were asking from my caseworker was I think the voucher stuff, and paying for my deposit, and a notary note, too, that they asked for. They were just as making sure, okay, the voucher, getting the rent's worth for the first month and all that." -Jim*

Hurdles in the process included landlords who did not accept vouchers or had a waitlist, the need to demonstrate an income even though the voucher covers the rent, and the lack of credit history or rental history. Jim described some of these additional challenges:

> *'In this apartment that I'm in right now, it was the only place that was successful in housing. We just kept trying and did all these applications for housing, and then this last one that we had put in, they accepted me—because of the no-housing history. No lease, no history of lease ever. They didn't know if they could trust me to let me in their apartments, which makes sense 'cause there's no lease that I ever had before. It's kinda hard to tell which person that will let in their property, right? They gave it a shot for me and stuff, so now I'm here. I thought there was no hope for a while because I'm fighting a case. There was so much on me. I had to pay for a lot of stuff, pre-trial stuff, charges. It was just crazy. Now everything's working out. Everything's working out. I didn't even think I was gonna have this apartment that looks this nice and stuff." -Jim*

Maintaining Housing While Struggling with Financial Instability

Although youth do not need to have an income to receive a voucher, they eventually need to have a plan for how to pay for utilities, groceries, and other

necessities. After receiving assistance for moving in and one-time support with groceries or hygiene articles, youth began wondering about how to "keep the lights on." In some instances, youth had to choose between paying phone or utility bills and buying groceries. Some were surprised or confused that utilities were a separate charge from rent and not covered by their voucher.

> *'I actually just moved in my apartment last Friday. Really, I was trying to figure out how I was gonna keep the lights and stuff on. 'Cause the program I'm in, you gotta pay your own light bill. Utilities. Anyways, that's what I'm trying to figure out—make a plan for that right now. Keeping my phone on because they gotta call you and stuff. The difficult part about that was keeping my phone on." - Naomi*
>
> *'They do not [provide support with food, phone bill, internet, utilities]. When I first moved into the apartment, they helped one time with, I believe, $150 for groceries. As you would know, that didn't last long. Like I said, currently there'll be days where I will go without eating." - Jessica*
>
> *'Now, at the moment, I am getting assistance for my rent, so I don't have to worry about that. When I did move in, my rent was like $400, but I'm without a job right about now, so my rent is covered. The whole water bill/rent thing is separate. Why not put it in the rent? Make it easier 'cause now it seems like you're tryin' to just charge me, and at this point, like I tried to explain to them, I don't have a job. I have assistance through the [PHA] because they do the utility assistance and the rental assistance." -Cara*

Most participants had recently moved into housing. Erica was an exception, as she had a longer history in housing voucher programs and described having lost housing twice. Serious physical health and mental health issues, criminal history, and unstable employment situations made it impossible for her to maintain employment and a regular income.

> *'I had health issues. I have real bad health issues. I had got sick, really, really bad sick. I was working at the airport, so I had to get off leave. It caused me to basically lose my job. Then it went down from there. I wasn't able to pay my bills. The program that I was in, they didn't pay my bills. It was kind of just like, 'Okay, we get you housed. We get you an apartment. We pay for you to move in. Okay, here's everything else. Now you gotta do it by yourself. You're literally living independently.' That's where I was at. I ended up losing my apartment. I had moved out before I was getting evicted. Then I got housed again. I just was recently housed, but I lost it due to the same situation. I told them already, 'That's what caused me to lose my first apartment. Can y'all help me a little bit more*

> *this time?' but the program that I was underneath, I guess they didn't help me with that. I wasn't in the program that I was supposed to be put in, I guess, the ones that do help pay everything if you need help with. I wasn't placed underneath that program because my score wasn't that score." -Erica*

Erica also described the need for more intensive case management and connection. Living in an apartment by herself increased her loneliness and she did not appear to have a social support network. In this case, monthly check-ins with her case manager were not sufficient to keep her going:

> *'I really wanted somebody there, just to be there for me. I didn't have nobody to call on there and talk to. It was just like, just suck it up and deal with it. That's what I was telling myself. You're doing this alone. You gotta do it alone, so." -Erica*

Discussion and New Directions

FYI and FUP voucher programs require a partnership between the Public Child Welfare Agency and Public Housing Authorities and encourage the inclusion of third-party partners who can assist in the identification of eligible youth and the provision of supportive services. The analysis of FYI and FUP voucher administration across communities in DFPS Region 7 demonstrates these partnerships can be structured in different ways, which has important implications for how youth access voucher programs and supportive services.

The housing authority in Austin/Travis County made the decision to administer the voucher programs through the Homeless Response System, while other housing authorities accept referrals from DFPS and community providers. Figures 5 and 6 summarize the different approaches and roles of partners. We highlight some of the benefits and drawbacks for each approach and possible solutions in the following section.

Addressing Literal Homelessness Versus Preventing Homelessness

Per HUD, the FUP and FYI vouchers are intended for *youth at least 18 years and not more than 24 years of age (have not reached their 25th birthday) who left foster care, or will leave foster care within 90 days, and are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless.* As such FUP and FYI voucher programs aim to both prevent homelessness and intervene with homelessness.

HUD emphasizes that the CoC "plays a critical role in identifying eligible youth in the community at risk of or experiencing homelessness that are no longer part of the child welfare system."[xxxiv] However, if vouchers are exclusively administered through the CoC and Coordinated Entry, as in Austin/Travis County, only youth who are experiencing literal homelessness or are fleeing/attempting to flee from domestic violence (HUD Categories 1 and 4) can access housing programs. Our interviews suggest that this process helps to identify young adults who are homeless and disconnected, especially those who have exited the foster care system via reunification or adoption before age 18. While these youth are no longer on the DFPS caseload and not eligible for foster care transition and aftercare services, they are eligible for FYI and FUP vouchers.

Conversely, relying on Coordinated Entry for administering vouchers eliminates access by youth who are still in foster care or extended care and are at risk of homelessness once they leave care. This is particularly challenging for some of the SIL and TLP providers, who are working with youth on a smooth transition and stable housing once they leave placement. As one SIL provider shared, they are being told that they can no longer directly refer their clients for housing voucher programs.

> *'What I'm hearing is that they're restructuring the application process, and you now have to be homeless in order to qualify for the Travis County voucher, which is absolutely ridiculous. We were supposed to not let it get to that point. We're supposed to prepare these kids, It's absolutely terrible." -Provider 2*

As interviews with youth demonstrated, not being able to transition smoothly from foster care into a voucher program may entail periods of housing insecurity that take a toll on their mental health and ability to pursue goals for employment and education. After prolonged periods of housing insecurity and homelessness, it may take even more resources and time to get back to a healthy state where housing stability can occur. Coordinated Entry, while successful at providing vouchers and supportive services for the most vulnerable youth experiencing literal homelessness, shifts resources from prevention to intervention. One DFPS staff member noted:

> *'A Coordinated Assessment is basically, as I understand it, what's the severity of the current crisis this youth is in? Match to the right housing options. What winds up happening is youth who may not be actively on the street right now aren't getting those highest scores and so aren't being routed to the [housing voucher] whereas the guidance from HUD says, 'Were you in foster care?' 'Yes.' 'Are you at risk of homelessness?*

Are you housing insecure?' 'Yes.' 'You should get the voucher.'" -DFPS Staff

HUD recently released the following clarification:

> *Youth cannot be required to go through the coordinated entry process in order to receive an FYI voucher. Rather HUD encourages PHAs to partner with the Continuum of Care (CoC) to integrate into the coordinated entry process the identification, prioritization, and referral of an FYI eligible youth not currently within the PCWA's [Public Child Welfare Agency's] caseload. […] Youth who are part of the PCWA's active caseload do not have to be added to the CoC's coordinated entry process.*[xxxv]

These additional guidelines suggest that Austin/Travis County partners may need to revise the current process. DFPS has proposed to restructure the voucher administration in Austin/Travis County to include two referral pathways: 1) referrals through the CoC's Coordinated Entry process focusing on youth experiencing literal homelessness, and 2) referrals through DFPS and child welfare providers focusing on youth at risk of homelessness when leaving foster care. Initially, 10% of vouchers could be set aside for referrals of youth at-risk of homelessness to explore how it would affect voucher utilization overall. DFPS states that other public housing authorities across the state are implementing this model successfully and have been able to target both prevention and intervention with literal homelessness.

Developing a Youth-Friendly Assessment

The Coordinated Assessment was created for the general population of people experiencing homelessness to have a standardized way for assessing the severity of their situation and need for services. Our interviews showed that youth were confused about the process, and some struggled with the language used on the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT; see Appendix C). Questions on the APAT self-report questionnaire, especially those about the chronicity of homelessness and disparate health outcomes, are less likely to be relevant to youth. As a result, youth typically score lower on the APAT than the overall population. The Coordinated Entry process takes this into account by prioritizing and staffing youth as a subpopulation. However, opportunities to ask about youth-specific risk factors and circumstances are missed.

> *'We're looking at the assessment when you take the Coordinated Assessment and asking specific questions that are more directed*

towards young adults so that we're able to prioritize based on the needs of young adults. I don't think we're there." -Provider 4

For example, the APAT does not consider common experiences among youth who are at risk for literal homelessness, such as house hopping or couch surfing. Youth described moving between places, an experience that took a toll on their health and at times entailed staying in abusive relationships that put them in danger. For youth with histories in foster care, couch surfing with family members may be especially triggering. After having been disconnected for years, they may feel unwelcome and unresolved or unaddressed conflicts and abuse may resurface. One DFPS staff member highlighted these challenges:

'If they're couch surfing, there's so much risk involved with that. A lot of times, when they're couch surfing, they may be in a home where there's active drug use and other things that are occurring, trafficking. That makes 'em more vulnerable. I don't think the assessment really captures what are they experiencing while couch surfing." -DFPS Staff

A youth-friendly assessment tool should assess the severity of literal homelessness, as well as the risk for homelessness, barriers to achieving housing stability, and protective factors. The Youth Homelessness System Improvement (YHSI) grant recently awarded to the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS)[xxxvi] presents an opportunity for CoCs to review their systems and create more youth-friendly assessment tools and practices that could be tested and implemented statewide.

Increasing Capacity for Supporting Youth Who Experience Homelessness in Austin/Travis County

In Austin/Travis County, interviews with stakeholders and data from the Homeless Response System show the need for housing has far outgrown the small number of FYI and FUP vouchers that become available each year. Of the 538 youth with foster care involvement who first completed a Coordinated Assessment in FY 2024, only 14% (*n* = 77 youth) of youth were able to enroll in Rapid Rehousing. Twenty-one FYI vouchers were used for rental assistance in combination with Rapid Rehousing. Not only is there a shortage in housing units, but also in supportive services that need to be offered with each voucher.

The shortage of housing vouchers and supportive services, as well as the extensive waitlist, put a strain on youth who are in desperate need for housing. ECHO now counts 929 youth, ages 18 to 25, on the prioritization list,

424 of whom disclosed a history of foster care. Interviews with youth highlighted the challenges in waiting for services and housing, including the potential escalation of an ongoing housing crisis. Youth especially noted that there are not enough youth-friendly shelters and gap housing options that provide a safe base to continue to pursue school and work and navigate steps towards permanent housing. The current length of the prioritization list raises important questions about what type of programs and services would be most effective at addressing a young person's needs and how the community can increase capacity for a range of programs and services. Strategies for diversion, such as short-term assistance with transportation, rent, and utilities, should also be explored.

Matching Youth with Supportive Services

Interviews with youth who enrolled in a housing program showed that once they cleared all the hurdles and signed a lease, they continued to struggle with paying for utilities, phone, food, and other essential items. Most did not have stable employment, and some had health and mental health issues that made it difficult to maintain employment. Continuing supportive services including basic life skills, employment and career counseling, and mental health services need to be tailored to each young person's needs to help them stabilize and thrive long-term.

Across the state, PHAs and community partners noted that the FYI program does not have adequate resources to provide the supportive services that are required by HUD and specified in the MOU. Limitations in supportive services further limit the number of vouchers that can be leased out. PHAs rely on DFPS After Care Transitional Services to assist with case management for youth ages 18 to 21, but there are few resources to support youth ages 21 to 24, and providers seek to leverage other programs. For example, rental assistance through the FYI or FUP voucher can complement case management available through the Rapid Rehousing program. Providers and staff at ECHO describe the current capacity crisis:

> *'We've recently seen a capacity shortage where, all of a sudden, caseloads are really full. The pull has slowed, and our by-name list for prioritization has really stacked up. I think the community still has a lot of work to do. I think we have to scale what services we're gonna provide. I think [the prioritization list] works when our rate of inflow and outflow are either matched or the outflow is greater than the inflow. We're just not there right now. That's where this is feeling so challenging." -Provider 4*
>
> *'I know, at this time, [provider] has been trying to get all of their clients who are housed within their Rapid Rehousing Program DFPS verified.*

They're still eligible for the voucher even though they've been housed with [provider]. They can now use a voucher for extra rental assistance. They're doing that right now, versus actively pulling. The youth who might've missed out on a voucher when they initially got pulled for a housing program can now utilize the voucher." -ECHO Staff

DFPS is seeking additional partnerships and resources to fill the gap in supportive services. This may include an extended partnership with the Texas Work Force Commission—which already provides support for foster youth at youth transition centers—or leveraging resources through Medicaid programs such as the Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Waiver, which may be expanded to include transition-aged youth and provide intensive wrap-around services.

Increasing Transparency, Coordination, and Cross-Sector Training

Community providers, caseworkers, and youth reported challenges with accessing information and understanding the FYI and FUP voucher administration. In Austin/Travis County, CoC partners have worked out detailed policies and procedures, but providers outside of this circle have little information and understanding of the process or how voucher programs are administered. Community collaboration and cross sector training that incudes PHAs, CoC, DFPS, and providers serving transition-aged youth are needed to clarify misconceptions. Improving training and coordination among PHA, DFPS, CoC, and community providers will ultimately benefit youth, as one provider noted:

'I just keep finding people who have an unrealistic expectation that services just work. Just go try. Just go google it. Just go to the office. And/or people who just don't understand all the intricacies. I think that's problematic. This is a population we should be experts on. We should be able to care coordinate at a level that is not happening." -Provider 1

Summary

- Both youth who are aging out of foster care and those with foster care histories not currently on the child welfare agency's caseload are eligible for FYI and FUP vouchers.
- FYI and FUP voucher programs require, at minimum, a collaboration between the PHA and the Public Child Welfare Agency and the provision of supportive services. Third-party partners, such as CoC,

homeless coalition, and other community providers, are essential for increasing voucher utilization rates.

- There are currently two different models for voucher administration in Region 7. In Region 7A, eligible youth are identified by DFPS or a child welfare provider and then referred to the PHA which limits voucher recipients to those currently on the DFPS caseload. In Region 7B, represented by Austin/Travis County, youth are identified and prioritized through the CoC's Coordinated Assessment which limits voucher recipients to those currently homeless or fleeing domestic violence. Recently published HUD guidance states that these different pathways should be integrated rather than be considered mutually exclusive.
- In Austin/Travis County, the shortage of housing vouchers and supportive services and the extensive waitlist put a strain on youth who are in need for housing. ECHO now counts 929 youth, ages 18 to 25, on the prioritization list, 424 of whom disclosed a history in foster care. As shown earlier in this report, in Fiscal Year 2024 only 77 youths who completed a Coordinated Assessment that same year were enrolled in Rapid Rehousing. Among those youth, 21 youth received an FYI voucher.
- Supportive services beginning with housing navigation and throughout the duration of the voucher program are essential for all youth. Youth who struggle with health and mental health issues, securing employment, and maintaining positive relationships with peers, colleagues, and partners need intensive supportive services. However, community resources for providing supportive services, especially for youth ages 21 to 24, are inadequate and further limit the use of voucher programs.

Key Findings and Recommendations

In Texas, 33% of youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness at age 21, which is above the national average of 29%.[xxxvii] In Austin/Travis County, the number of young adults ages 18 to 25, who are seeking housing assistance through the homeless response system has more than doubled in the past three years, from 376 youth in Fiscal Year 2022 to 1,018 youth in Fiscal Year 2024. Among these youth, 53% report a history in foster care.[xxxviii] Furthermore, these data only capture youth who access the Coordinated Entry process through the Austin/Travis County Homeless Response System. Youth who are unaware of the Homeless Response System or who are currently couch-surfing or house-hopping but not literally homeless are not included in this count. Homeless prevention and intervention programs, such as in-foster-care and out-of-foster care housing options, have not kept pace with the need in the community, leading to the current crisis point.

Existing research and our current study show substance use and mental health concerns, criminal justice involvement, and a history of disrupted placements including runaway episodes or being without placement are associated with increased risk for homelessness.[xxxix] In addition, youth growing up in institutionalized and restrictive settings, whether in juvenile justice or residential treatment centers, often miss out on experiences and learning that are considered typical for their age-group, such as growing independence in daily decision making, peer and romantic relationships, educational enrichment, and work experience.[xl] As a result, these youth are ill equipped to develop healthy relationships, master education and employment, and achieve stability, safety, and wellbeing.

The present study focused on this most vulnerable group of young adults and sought to understand how the foster care system and the Homeless Response System in Austin/Travis County can better support their housing needs and long-term wellbeing. We developed an environmental scan of support services for youth with foster care history in Austin/Travis County; met with stakeholders; and interviewed eight young adults with lived experience in foster care and homelessness. Our findings are not generalizable to all youth with foster care experience or to other communities in Texas or nationally; however, they provide important insights about the needs of youth in Austin/Travis County and recommendations for developing more youth friendly and accessible services.

In the presentation of findings, we focused first on extended foster care as a tool for preventing homelessness and then housing voucher programs for former foster youth intended to both prevent and intervene with homelessness. For each of these strategies, we shared provider perspectives, youth experiences, and current discussions in the community about how to improve the delivery of programs and address the needs of homeless youth. In the following section, we will discuss key findings and recommendations for increased coordination across prevention and intervention strategies and conclude with suggestions from our youth participants.

Recommendations for Strengthening Prevention and Intervention

Encourage Normalcy to Build Readiness for Independence

Across extended foster care and housing voucher programs, there are concerns that some of the most vulnerable youth with history in foster care have not developed the skills to live independently, maintain employment, attain financial stability, and thrive long term. Due to mental and behavioral health issues, placement changes, and restrictive settings, they may not have had the opportunity to participate in age-appropriate "normal" experiences, which include building lasting friendships and connections in the community, getting a driver's license, or learning through internships or summer jobs.

It is essential for these youth to receive enhanced case management and intensive supportive services, whether in extended care or out-of-care housing programs. To be effective, these services need to be driven by youth and increase agency, decision-making, and experiential learning. As one of the youth interviewees stated, young adults "need time to actually become the independent person that they are trying to become." Additional suggestions surfacing in conversations included partnering with a broader range of service providers in the community, allowing young people to choose providers they are comfortable with, and considering roles for peers and alumni as staff and mentors.

Develop and Regularly Revisit Housing Plans with Youth

While some youth may leave foster care without well-developed transition and housing plans, others do have housing plans that fail or need to be revisited and adjusted over time. Youth may have wanted to find their

biological family or thought they could make it on their own; for others, an initial extended care placement did not work out as intended and needed to be adjusted. DFPS has recently updated their website on Youth Housing Programs[xli] and developed a Housing Plan document intended to spur conversation with youth to think through their options and goals. It is important to note that a housing plan is a living document that will change as youth grow, learn, and seek new opportunities. As such, housing plans should be continually revised during the transition out of care.

Recognize the Importance of Connections and Relationship Skills

Conversations about independent living tend to focus on education, employment, financial literacy, and planning. Often overlooked is the importance of healthy and supportive relationships with family, peers, and partners that are essential for young people to thrive. Efforts at family preservation and maintaining or rebuilding connections with birth families are important considering many youths leave foster care with the intention of reconnecting with their birth families, sometimes experiencing homelessness when these connections fall apart.

Furthermore, the role of relationship skills for success in educational or employment settings cannot be underestimated. Youth who have experienced trauma and developed adversarial and distrustful relationships in the foster care system often carry these feelings and attitudes forward in new settings. They may not know how to communicate with a boss, work through conflicts with colleagues, cope with mental health crises, and advocate for themselves, all of which ultimately undermines their ability to maintain employment.

Finally, on the Coordinated Entry Assessment, a staggering 58% of youth with foster care involvement reported having experienced domestic violence, which entails further trauma. Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that developing relationships skills and preventing victimization and perpetration should be emphasized in after-care transition, extended foster care, and supportive services associated with voucher programs.

Support Youth Who Exited Foster Care Before Turning 18

Various studies show that up to 15% of children who are being adopted or find a permanent guardian, may experience a disruption of these relationships [xlii] that sharply increases during the teenage years.[xliii] In some

cases,[xliv] adoptions "dissolve" at age 18, leaving youth without support, security, and supportive relationships with caring adults. Among the eight interview participants for this study, three had been in foster care for an extended amount of time but left care through reunification and adoption before age 18. These youth expressed confusion and frustration about not being eligible for any support through the child welfare system, with one stating:

> *'I'm a mom. I legit came to you guys. You should be able to still assist a person, whether they're 18 or not [when they leave care]. Like if a person spends their whole life in there— 'Okay, well you spent more than a decade with us. Come on, then. We'll take care of you." -Cara*

While youth like Cara are not eligible to return to extended foster care, they are eligible for the FYI and FUP housing vouchers. Since these youth are no longer on the child welfare agency's caseload, it is imperative that other youth-serving agencies, homeless service providers, or the CoC identify their potential voucher eligibility and request foster care verification from DFPS.

View In-Care and Out-Of-Care Housing Options Holistically to Increase Capacity for Prevention and Intervention

Extended foster care and housing voucher programs are important strategies for creating a safety net for youth who transition into adulthood. Ideally, these strategies should be integrated to scaffold and maximize support for youth, especially in tight housing markets. The Corporation for Supportive Housing suggests to:

> *Consider timing of assistance, including opportunities to support the young person in leveraging and maximizing other opportunities such as extended foster care and independent living programs while they are in care that can then be followed by at least 36 months of FUP/FYI housing assistance as a means to extend support for their housing with aligned services and supports throughout the periods of later adolescence and early adulthood, providing more time for development of independent living skills, stability, healing, education career pathways, etc.*[xlv]

In Austin/Travis County, we noted barriers toward integrating extended foster care and housing voucher programs. First, there is not enough extended foster care capacity in the community, especially regarding Transitional Living Programs and Supervised Independent Living Programs

with Enhanced Case Management. There is also a significant number of youths under the age of 21 who are experiencing homelessness and self-report foster care involvement. Second, the federal eligibility requirements for extended foster care are at odds with the Housing First approach that is adopted by the Homeless Response System, which leads to value conflicts and tension between these two systems. Extended foster care requirements, namely that youth agree to continue their education or work at least 80 hours per month and/or participate in an activity that removes barriers to employment, pose a challenge for those youth who are at highest risk for homelessness. Third, the voucher administration through the Continuum of Care and the Coordinated Entry process has shifted the focus of these programs from prevention to intervention with the youth who are already experiencing homelessness. Given the increasing numbers of youth who seek housing services through the homeless response system, the voucher programs do not offer sufficient resources to address the housing crisis.

Overall, closer collaboration between DFPS, extended foster care providers, the PHA, and the CoC is needed to prevent homelessness among youth who have left foster care. This might include a community taskforce or coalition on addressing homelessness among youth, a rethinking of referral pathways for in-care and out-of-care housing programs, and a dashboard with regular updates on available housing vouchers and other community resources.

Given staff turnover, the complexities of extended foster care and voucher administration, and local and regional differences, it is important to clearly document processes and provide ongoing cross sector training for providers, COCs, DFPS staff, and public housing authorities.

Expand Targeted Prevention and Intervention to Address the Housing Crisis

Considering the rising number of homeless youths in Austin/Travis County, there is a scarcity of community resources for both prevention and intervention. Additional investment, infrastructure, and programs are needed to address the housing crisis along the continuum of prevention to intervention.

Targeted prevention

A broader array of in-care and out-of-care transitional living programs, including programs that adopt a harm reduction and Housing First approach, needs to be supported through adequate funding and practices that center the developmental needs of youth for developing agency, making their own decisions, and learning through experience.

Diversion

Some youth may be able to stabilize with short-term support for rent, utilities, and transportation. Currently these and other short-term supports are scattered among different providers and difficult to navigate. Additional funding is needed to support and coordinate diversion and make it easier for youth to access.

Emergency and Gap Housing

The community needs to develop youth-friendly emergency or gap housing that reduces the barriers to accessing resources, offers a bridge while waiting for permanent housing programs to open, and maintains flexibility so youth can develop their own plans for the future.

Housing Programs

Recognizing the need for expanding housing programs in the community, the Housing Authority of the City of Austin applied for and was recently awarded an additional set of 52 FYI vouchers. ECHO anticipates that providers in the community will create more than 1,200 permanent supportive housing units by the end of 2027[xlvi]. Among these investments,[xlvii] 50 new supportive housing units at Lifeworks will specifically benefit youth and be a step toward addressing the capacity crisis.

Use Data to Drive Community Coordination and Planning

The utilization of both in-care and out-of-care housing options for former foster youth is strikingly uneven across DFPS Region 7. While Austin/Travis County notes high utilization of all available housing options in the face of a youth homelessness crisis, other areas report unused capacity. Increased outreach and capacity for conducting Coordinated Assessments, which track foster care involvement, have brought the crisis in Austin/Travis County into the spotlight. At the same time, the lack of data in other communities makes it difficult to ascertain whether their underutilization of housing vouchers merely reflects challenges with identifying eligible youth or lower levels of need in the community due to youth preferring in-care housing options or being able to access affordable housing. This report demonstrates the need for data to drive community collaboration, coordination, and planning.

Youth Recommendations

Youth interviewees provided some specific recommendations on how to make resources and programs more youth-friendly, accessible, and meaningful. Recommendations ranged from getting to know youth and their

goals for the future to providing individualized support and experiential learning opportunities. Above all, youth called for important shifts in how youth-serving professionals and community members relate to youth.

Be Open and Get to Know Youth

Youth agreed one of the most impactful changes would be providers taking more time in understanding their situation, individual needs, and goals for the future, and listening beyond checklists and assessments. As Naomi stated, "one conversation could have prevented a lot of stuff."

> *'Personally, if I was to sit on a panel, I would give feedback to youth organizations. I would tell them to be more mindful of the situation and actually take the time to hear their clients out, and to see what their client is in need of and try their hardest to actually help that client. Giving them more options, I would say." -Jessica*
>
> *'My recommendation, I feel like they need to get to know their clients because they have to ask all these questions that's on paperwork and stuff like that, but I wish they would get to know their clients a little more, and actually really help them. Really, really, really help 'em." -Erica*

Youth also noted that communication goes both ways. Their advice to other youth was to be open-minded, ask questions, do their own research, and let providers know what they want and need.

> *'My recommendation [to youth] would be just look at the world around you, research and just talk to people. Ask people what you really need and what you really want and ask them what helps you to get things done, to be really open. You can be like, 'Oh, can you go take me here? Can we do this here?' It's always different for everybody, but my recommendation would be just do a lot of research. It's all about communication and just being open-minded and stuff." -Jim*

Think of Yourself as a Coach

Flexible but consistent support and coaching were essential for youth to thrive. Youth emphasized that they valued a strong connection with a caseworker who could push them and offer the extra help when needed. Rather than being "managed," they wanted to be listened to and "coached." They also wanted caseworkers to understand that they needed time to become independent.

'The most helpful for me was that they was pushing me to stay focused. [My caseworker], he's like a coach, right? I come from a place where it was hard, and it was also hard for me to focus on my own goals and stuff. I had the right team. If other youth are out there, I hope they have caseworkers where they push them because I feel like the way that I had help would really help them too—have a caseworker to push them in care and help them with what could really help them or having meetings every week." -Jim

Provide Opportunities for Experiential Learning and Remember, "We Are Still Kids."

Youth spoke to the need for advice and support from adults, just like their peers who have family support. They also reiterated that they needed information at the right time and repeatedly. While youth may have heard about housing options in a PAL class or teen conference, that information may have felt overwhelming in the moment or not yet relevant. Youth suggested offering advice in personal conversations and opportunities for hands-on and experiential learning would be more effective for building confidence and skills.

'Remember, even though we're like adults, we're still trying to navigate the world just like everybody else. We're struggling just as much as anybody else or even more. I have to think of, 'I gotta pay this bill or that bill.' It's a lot of responsibility for one person, and it's gonna get overwhelming. I just say, show up for your kids. Show up. Sometimes, let's not talk about adult stuff. Let's just be kids for a little bit 'cause even though we're legally 18 or whatever, we still are kids and still trying to figure out the world just as much as anybody else." -Sheila

'Give advice and stuff, professional advice. Or sometimes your personal advice and sometimes just be like, 'We can help you with this. We can't help you with that, but you can try to do this.' Pretty much just try to just give some advice to young adults like me. Just give advice." -Alex

'At least on your last month—knowing you're gonna age out—they could do a little class or something to teach you a little bit about life 'cause you've been caged in for a day near forever—however long you've been in there. You don't know none of this stuff, and they just send you off … That's definitely what's missing—the guidance and them showing you everything, like what to do, what to expect when you're on your own and all that." -Naomi

Jim described how initially his caseworker telling him about housing "didn't click." However, touring apartments and talking to people engaged him in the housing application process.

> *'I noticed that what really helped me to get into housing was that my caseworker, he was talking about housing. He would tell me, but I think he wanted me to really engage into housing. He knew that him telling me the stuff didn't really click to me. Then, at one point, he just took me to go see the place that I could be living at 18 or 19. When he did that, I was like, 'Man, I could have my own house like this or this, this and that? It looks so nice. It looks so beautiful.' I was like, 'Man, I could really have my own space.' That's what he did. He took me to places to go talk to people. That really helped me a lot to grind to have my place. My recommendations would be the caseworkers to not just tell them but take them to places and show them what the place can be like if they put in the effort to do applications. Show them, 'Hey, look, can you see yourself living here?' Look around the house. Walk around a little bit. Look at the kitchen. It's really like having their own personal living space. I think that would help in really engaging with them." -Jim*

Make Resources Easier to Be Found

Another recommendation was to make it easier to find and access resources and housing information. Suggestions included issuing cell phones to youth who are homeless and reducing the barriers to finding services.

> *'I would want them to give you a phone. 'Cause how are you gonna get in contact with people or with just anybody? How are you gonna call all the resources and all that." -Naomi*
>
> *'Make it easier to be found. Based off 'cause not everybody has a phone. I got lucky. I was able to do what I had to do to, get myself where I am, and get myself a cellphone. 'Cause not everybody gets a phone when they run away or when they leave or whatever happens." -Cara*
>
> *'I know that there are resources, but they're not all obtainable, and I feel like there are a lot of hoops that you have to jump through when going through those things. I feel like if you just made them more accessible to people, that it would be more helpful." -Josie*

Youth also suggested to provide housing information in a more usable form, create videos and apps, or simply write down resources and create a goal sheet. Receiving information in a tangible and clearly organized format was especially important for youth who had disabilities and struggled with processing information.

'Because I have insane ADHD, it's crippling, almost. I'm like, 'Well, I can't keep everything in my mind.' I just write everything that I need to do that month—or the upcoming months—and then, maybe, a goals sheet. That's what I do. Honestly, that helps me so much. That would've been way better if they gave you a list of resources. I would say they should have printed out people a list of resources or where to go to get a care package or housing 'cause you're aging out, so you're gonna need that. This is just me." -Naomi

Engage Youth in Developing Flexible Support Services

Youth noted that there were times when they needed some extra help. While they understood program requirements, regulations, and policies, they hoped for help to be provided in a more flexible manner. They also expressed a desire to be engaged in reviewing and designing services or taking on a peer mentorship role.

'I know within the agency, there's a lot of rules, and they're limited to so much that they could do and can't do. I feel like maybe those rules and bylaws need to be updated a little bit because there are some things that were there—some case managers, they really, really wanna help." -Erica

'My impact and everything that I've been through, it gives me an opportunity to lead others, too, that feel lost because I was in that situation. They didn't know what resources are out there. It doesn't stop, either, because even to this day, I've been running into people, and they're stuck or down and stuff. I be trying to tell them everything that I know, and they'd be like, 'Wait, man. I didn't even know that.' I think because a lot of people like me, we also want somebody that we can relate to or to have similar lifestyles because it lets them know, 'Well, if they became successful, I could become successful.' Sometimes we need that person in our life—they've been through it all, too, and they still became successful. It inspires them. I think we need caseworkers like that in our corners because they can share with you what they did." -Jim

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with a small number of youths who experienced foster care and homelessness, and our findings are not generalizable to all youth with history in foster care or all youth who experience homelessness. Additional research should consider reaching out to a broader segment of the population. This could include surveys with youth who access the Coordinated Entry process, as well as surveys with those who are not accessing any formal supports.

Second, interviews with stakeholders were focused on Austin/Travis County and provided a snapshot of different perspectives and the ongoing conversations in the community. Findings may not be representative of all organizations involved and cannot be generalized to other communities or the state of Texas. Third, we focused the environmental scan and stakeholder interviews on extended foster care, homeless response, and housing voucher programs designated for youth with history in foster care. Other factors that are critically important in preventing and ending homelessness, such as employment and health and mental health services, were beyond the scope of this study. Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into the experiences of youth and opportunities for strengthening coordination across systems and programs.

Conclusions

This collaborative study was motivated by the rapidly increasing number of youths experiencing homelessness in Austin/Travis County. The capacity for prevention and intervention has not kept pace with community needs, especially in a tight housing market, leading to a crisis where in Fiscal Year 2024 more than 900 youth seeking housing services have completed a Coordinated Assessment and are waiting for support. Among these youth, more than half have a history in foster care and present with additional risk factors, such as disabilities and domestic violence, that make them more vulnerable and less likely to resolve their housing crisis on their own.

This crisis in the community makes it imperative to strengthen prevention efforts by the child welfare system. Additional Transitional Living Programs and Supervised Independent Living programs with Extended Case Management could be important tools for supporting the most vulnerable youth who do not succeed in traditional Supervised Independent Living programs. These placement options would need to be designed to help youth develop agency, competency, and healthy relationships and prepare them for achieving stability, safety, and long-term wellbeing in adulthood. Likewise, additional community efforts are needed for strengthening the homeless response and developing youth-friendly access points and assessments. Emergency and gap housing, as well as expanded voucher programs and supportive services are needed to alleviate the housing crisis for youth with history in foster care.

We also noted the need for cross-system training and information sharing about the different in-care and out-of-care housing options, so that providers can more effectively coordinate resources and referrals. Above all, youth

need to be involved in designing tools for navigating resources and flexible programs that meet their needs.

We hope this report will increase awareness of the trauma of homelessness for youth with foster care experience; contribute to improved coordination between child welfare, homeless response, public housing authorities, and youth-serving providers; and help the community move toward more youth-friendly and youth-driven prevention and response.

Appendix A: Interview Guide for Stakeholders

Introduction

The Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing, ECHO and change1.org are conducting a study in Austin/Travis County that explores the services available to young adults with foster care histories who are encountering homelessness. The purpose of the study is to better understand how young adults access homelessness services, what barriers they encounter, and how the community might prevent homelessness and support their housing needs.

Before we begin, I will go over the study information sheet and consent form with you and give you the opportunity to ask questions. We appreciate your participation in an interview.

Interview Guide

1. What is your role within your organization?
2. How long have you been working in this capacity?
3. How does your organization support the housing needs of young people who are exiting the foster care system?
4. How do young people typically access these services?
5. What are the eligibility requirements and rules for receiving these services?
6. What are barriers to accessing these services?
7. To which extent do available services meet the needs that you observe in Austin/ Travis County?
8. What are gaps in services based on your experience and perspective?
9. How well do child welfare, housing, employment, and homelessness response services coordinate their work?
10. How well are you informed about benefits for youth transitioning out of foster care?
11. What are strategies for preventing homelessness and supporting the housing needs of youth transitioning out of foster care that could be implemented in Austin/ Travis County?

Closing

1. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that is relevant to supporting transition-age youth and their housing needs?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Youth

Introduction

The Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing, ECHO and change1.org are conducting a study in Austin/Travis County that explores the services available to young adults with foster care histories who are encountering homelessness. The purpose of the study is to better understand how young adults access homelessness services, what barriers they encounter, and how the community might prevent homelessness and support their housing needs.

Before we begin, I will go over the study information sheet and consent form with you and give you the opportunity to ask questions. We appreciate your participation in an interview.

Interview Guide

1. Can you share your experience of leaving the foster care system? How did you feel about the transition to living independently?
2. What was your plan for living independently, including finding housing? What kind of living situation did you imagine for yourself? How did things actually work out for you? Did you face any unexpected opportunities or challenges?
3. When did you first experience housing instability or homelessness after leaving foster care? What were the circumstances?
4. Where did you turn for support during that time?
5. What kind of support did you receive, and from which organizations?
6. How did you feel about the support and services you received? If you had choices, how did you decide what to do?
7. What was the most helpful support you received? What do you think was missing?
8. What were your next steps in dealing with housing instability or homelessness?
9. What difficulties or obstacles did you experience in accessing benefits and resources?
10. Right now, what are your long-term housing goals? Where do you see yourself living in the next few years?

11. Do you have any strategies for managing housing expenses?
12. Looking back at your experience, what might have prevented your experience with housing instability or homelessness?
13. What recommendations do you have for systems/ organizations that provide services for youth like yourselves?
14. What advice would you give to other young people who might be experiencing similar challenges?

Closing

15. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that is relevant to supporting transition-age youth and their housing needs?
16. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C: Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT)

Section 1 - Household/History of Homelessness				
1	Frequent unsheltered homelessness	Where do you sleep most frequently? (Choose One: Shelters, Transitional Housing, Safe Haven, Outdoors, Other, Refused)	"Outdoors" = 1 point	6 point total
2	Length of current homelessness	How long has it been since you lived in permanent stable housing?	1 year or more = 1 point	
3	Number of times experiencing homelessness	In the last three years, how many times have you been homeless?	4 times or more = 1 point	
4	Advanced age	Staff Question: Does the household currently contain at least one member age 50 or older?	"Yes" = 1 point	
5	Minor children	Staff Question: Does the household currently contain at least one child under the age of 18 (not awaiting custody after housing)?	"Yes" = 1 point	
6	Pregnant or breastfeeding	Is anyone in the household pregnant and/or breastfeeding?	"Yes" = 1 point	
Section 2 - Disparate Health Outcomes				
7	Healthcare access	When you are sick or not feeling well, do you avoid getting help?	"Yes" = 1 point	8 point total
8	HIV/AIDS	If there was space available in a program that specifically assists people that live with HIV or AIDS, would that be of interest to you?	"Yes" = 1 point	
9	High Blood Pressure	Do you or does anyone in your household have high blood pressure?	"Yes" = 1 point	

10	End Stage Diseases	Are you currently living with a progressive end stage disease? Examples include, but are not limited to, End Stage Renal Disease, Congestive Heart Failure (CHF), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), and Cancer.	"Yes" = 1 point	
11a	Activities of Daily Living	Do you have a medical condition or a health concern that affects your activities of daily living (ADLs)? For example, do you have trouble with eating, showering, using the restroom, taking the bus, or moving around in general due to your health?	If yes, move on to 11b	
11b	ADL Scale	On a scale from 1-4, with 1 being it does not affect your ADLs at all and 4 being that it completely impacts or impairs your ADLs, how much difficulty do you have eating, showering, using the restroom, taking the bus, or moving around due to your health?	4 = 1 point	
12a	Violence	Have you been attacked or beaten up since you've become homeless?	If either "Yes" = 1 point	
12b		Have you threatened or tried to harm yourself or anyone else in the last year?		
13a	Mental health	Have you ever had trouble maintaining your housing, or been kicked out of an apartment, shelter program or other place you were staying, because of a mental health issue or concern?	If either "Yes" = 1 point	
13b		Do you have any mental health or brain issues that would make it hard for you to live independently because you'd need help?		

14	Substance use	Has your drinking or drug use led you to being kicked out of an apartment or program where you were staying in the past?	"Yes" = 1 point	
Section 3 - Potential Barriers to Housing				
15	Education	What is the highest grade or level of school you have completed?	Less than high school completion or equivalent = 1 point	7 point total
16	Foster Care	Have you ever been in foster care—that is, placed in a foster home, another relative's home, a group home, or in some other out-of-home placement?	"Yes" = 1 point	
17	Juvenile Justice	Have you ever been sentenced to spend time in jail, prison, a juvenile detention center, a residential facility, or other correctional facility prior to the age of 18?	"Yes" = 1 point	
18	Criminal History	Have you ever been denied access to employment and/or housing due to your criminal background? Or have you ever opted out of applying for employment and/or housing due to your background?	"Yes" = 1 point	
19	Raised in a Multi-Generational Household	When you were growing up, did you usually have members from multiple generations in your household (more than two, like grandparents or grandkids)?	"Yes" = 1 point	
20	Austin Born/Raised	Were you born and or raised in Austin?	"Yes" = 1 point	
21	Gentrification	Did any of the responses [to 21a or 21b] include any of the July 2020 ZIP codes (78701; 78702; 78717; 78721; 78723; 78725; 78728; 78741; 78744; 78748; 78749; 78752; 78753;	"Yes" = 1 point	

		78754;78757; 78613; 78641, or "East Austin")?		
21a		(If yes to were you born and raised in Austin), which Zip Code or Neighborhood did you grow up in?		
21b		If you have ever been permanently housed in Austin, what was the last zip code of that housing?		
			Total Points:	**0 - 21**

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