

YOUTH COLLABORATORY COMMENTS ON USICH STRATEGIC PLAN**NOVEMBER 30, 2021****ENDING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS THROUGH
TARGETED UNIVERSALISM AND HIGH LEVERAGE COMPONENTS**

Prior to the COVID pandemic, our nation faced an acute crisis of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, at imminent risk of homelessness, or who had been forced to flee unsafe or unwelcoming home environments. A ground-breaking 2018 study by Chapin Hall revealed the most accurate assessment to date on the prevalence of youth homelessness in the United States: 1 in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 (approximately 3.5 million individuals) will endure some form of homelessness in a year, and 1 in 30 adolescent minors ages 13 to 17 (approximately 700,000 children) will experience unaccompanied homelessness in a year. Additionally, youth homelessness is a pervasive issue in all communities, with nearly identical rates of adolescent homelessness in rural and nonrural communities (4.4% and 4.2% respectfully), and higher but similar rates for young adults (9.2% and 9.6%). Youth who experience even brief unaccompanied homelessness are at extreme risk. A 2017 study by Covenant Houses found that nearly 1 in 5 (19.4%) youth experiencing homelessness were victims of human trafficking, of which 15% were trafficked for sex, 7.4% trafficked for labor, and 3% of youth were trafficked for both.

The exploding opioid crisis, unequal economic recovery, the growing awareness of domestic human trafficking, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and individuals has only exacerbated the youth homelessness crisis. Emerging findings from analysis by Dr. Matthew Morton (Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago) and Dr. Gerald Daniels (Howard University) indicates that 2.9 million young adults had too little to eat, and 2.4 million had little to no confidence to pay their rent or mortgage during the pandemic. (BIPOC) communities have been disproportionately damaged by COVID; more than 1 in 4 Black young adults (28%) experienced food insecurity -- more than twice the rate of their White peers (12%).¹ Furthermore, Mathematica produced [a detailed analysis of youth unemployment](#) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, distributed by age and race. The report found that, as of March 2021, the unemployment rate for Black young adults ages 20-24 (16.7%) was 75% higher than their White peers (9.5%).

To effectively end youth and young adult homelessness in our country, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) should adopt a targeted universalist approach to the new

¹ Morton, M. & Daniels, G. (forthcoming). *The Untold Story: Youth & Racial Dimensions of COVID-19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. A Targeted Universalism framework establishes, “universal goals for all groups concerned; but the strategies developed to achieve those goals are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies to obtain the universal goal.”² Young people who experience homelessness deserve the same right to safe and stable housing as older adults, families, and veterans. However, the strategies that are successful in securing safe and stable housing for youth (under age 18) and young adults (age 24 and under) who experience unaccompanied homelessness, may not be appropriate or effective if applied to older adults in need of long-term supportive services or families with young children. Youth Collaboratory encourages USICH to incorporate universal goals for all people experiencing homelessness, AND to also elucidate strategies that understand and meet the unique needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

In 2019, Youth Collaboratory released the findings of *Activating Uptake* (<https://youthcollaboratory.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2020-07/Activating%20Uptake%20Findings%20Report.pdf>), a survey of 55 communities with initiatives focused on preventing and ending youth homelessness with the purpose of extracting the components common to successful communities and rapidly enhancing the field’s understanding of which strategies are most effective for young people. The survey of these initiatives, referred to by Youth Collaboratory as “catalytic projects”, yielded eight high leverage components:

1. Authentic youth collaboration in project design and implementation
2. Centering equity
3. Prevention focus
4. Collective ownership
5. Strong local leadership
6. Cross-system collaboration
7. Effective data collection and utilization
8. Capacity to drive change within local systems

AUTHENTIC YOUTH COLLABORATION

Encourage communities and public agencies to engage in an authentic, transparent, and collaborative decision-making process where youth and young adults with lived experience/expertise are partners in the work and have power to impact change. This level of engagement far transcends focus groups or advisory committees; youth should be in paid leadership roles in partnership with the organization. This often takes the form of active Youth

² Powell, John, Stephen Menendian and Wendy Ake, “Targeted universalism: Policy & Practice.” Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, University of California, Berkeley, 2019. haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism.

Action Boards representing multiple perspectives of youth and young adults with lived experience who are financially compensated for their time, expertise, and contributions.

We believe young people with lived expertise should be included at every level of policy making and see this as a natural next step to the work across the country to build local and state youth advisory boards to contribute to the movement to end youth homelessness.

USICH can model this policy by hiring youth with lived expertise to aid in the development of the new strategic plan, as well as explicitly stating within the plan the need for federal, state, and local public agencies to do the same. This includes hiring young people across federal departments and agencies to contribute in a formal capacity to program design and implementation.

CENTERING EQUITY

Effective strategies include an explicit commitment to equity for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth, beginning in the homeless response system, including agreement that if efforts are not scaled up to end homelessness among BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth, youth homelessness will not end. Effective communities acknowledge inequities and make commitments to not perpetuate the issues that exist through power redistribution and deep understanding of racial equity and LGBTQ+ equity issues across all data points. **The strategic plan should center equity by clearly chronicling the systemic barriers to housing that disproportionately impact BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth in a manner that is easy for communities and public agencies to read, understand, and begin to address at the local, state, and federal levels.**

PREVENTION FOCUS

To end youth homelessness permanently and equitably, two concurrent approaches are necessary: (1) meet the urgent needs of young people who are already experiencing homelessness; and (2) prevent youth from experiencing homelessness in the first place by recognizing and preemptively addressing the conditions that contribute to it, by boosting protective factors, and by putting effective resources and supports directly in the hands of young people and families who need them most.

At a community level, there is an urgent need to reduce the inflow of youth and young adults into homelessness. Preventing youth homelessness requires alignment and collaboration between youth and family systems. Communities must also take a holistic approach to partnerships that go beyond typical partners (criminal justice, education, and child welfare) and include connections to groups such as the cultural networks, faith communities, behavioral healthcare, and parenting support networks. **USICH's strategic plan should encourage a prevention focus in communities and federal, state, and local public agencies as part of concurrent strategies to meet the needs of youth currently experiencing homelessness.**

COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP

The Activating Uptake survey clearly demonstrated that communities which embrace a collective ownership of the issue of youth homelessness through a local or state plan of action --and include system performance and population outcome indicators-- are most successful in meeting the needs of young people. **USICH's federal plan should contain strategies to encourage all local communities to develop their own concrete local plans to coordinate system responses, as well as the communities' funding investments in programming.**

STRONG LEADERSHIP

Leaders in positions of influence, with the ability to act with urgency, adapt, and make decisions, is a critical factor in a communities' capacity to end youth homelessness.

Establishing a local champion of youth homelessness who is respected and listened to is a task for each individual community, and USICH and the federal strategic plan should accentuate this critical component within its youth-specific strategies for local communities. Strong local leadership is able to mediate disparate stakeholder opinions into a common set of values and goals. Effective leaders also should have the support and guidance of a body and/or entity such as a Youth Action Board that facilitates coordination between all relevant agencies on issues relating to youth homelessness with influence and authority to advance change.

CROSS-SYSTEMS COLLABORATION

School districts, child welfare and criminal justice agencies, behavioural health systems, and other agencies and community-based organizations that have regular and direct contact with young people are in the best position to identify and address potential antecedents to homelessness as they arise, but often lack the expertise, data, resources, and strong cross-system relationships to intervene in a timely and effective way. **The Federal Strategic Plan must emphasize cross-system collaboration at all levels of government as an effective strategy to end youth homelessness.** Communities that have strategies in place that demonstrate mutual interest and strong leadership and collaboration between systems to solve one another's challenges for the youth they have in common, are dramatically more effective in addressing youth homelessness.

EFFECTIVE DATA COLLECTION AND UTILIZATION

Too many communities rely on adult metrics and data collection for youth and young adult homelessness. Childhood and young adulthood are unique stages of life and are best measured in age-appropriate manners as is evident in a huge variety of existing systems such as health (pediatricians), education (pre-K through 12), or even car insurance rates. In order to truly understand and end youth homelessness in communities, data collection and utilization practices must be trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and meet the developmental needs of youth and young adults. Communities must also build a culture of continuous collection,

improvement, and data utilization in their decision-making processes, even when the data is not perfect. **USICH should work with stakeholders, communities, and people with lived expertise to develop recommended metrics and data collection and utilization practices that will be the most effective in accurately understanding youth homelessness in every community.** Individuals with lived expertise, including youth and young adults, should also partner in regularly reviewing and utilizing data for continuous systems improvement. Accurate data provides confidence that public resources are being utilized appropriately. Communities should endeavour to have a complete understanding of who is experiencing homelessness (quality by-name list) and understands inflow, returns to the homeless system, lengths of time homeless, from where youth are coming, and the community's inventory of resources.

CAPACITY TO DRIVE CHANGE

As with effective leadership, the ability to drive change must be derived from local actions, as such, USICH and the Federal Strategic Plan should identify the capacity to change as an effective component of ending youth and young adult homelessness. We, as a field, have the knowledge to end youth homelessness in all communities nationwide. However, doing so requires changes in our collective approach and the strategies we employ to meet the needs of young people. This involves shifting power so that individuals most impacted, specifically BIPOC, LGBTQ+ young people with lived expertise, are in decision-making roles within the homelessness system. Change is difficult, but communities that recognize the need to adapt and invest in driving change have tremendous success in addressing homelessness. Communities should have a specific entity and/or individual that facilitates coordination between all relevant agencies on issues relating to youth homelessness. The core leader(s), system partners, youth/young adult leaders, and community stakeholders must all buy into solving homelessness at the systems-level. The capacity to change also requires a strong investment in “infrastructure” necessary for a community to change its policies and practices, such as new data and computer systems that can communicate across various agencies.

Youth Collaboratory applauds USICH's commitment to developing a new strategic plan, and emphasizes the need for a targeted universalist approach to ending homelessness for ALL people, with specific strategies to make housing stability a reality for youth and young adults. We as a nation must commit now to the idea that housing is a human right, not a privilege, and should be accessible to all people regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality, or disability.