



A Definition of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth and Commission Approach

The Commission defines unaccompanied homeless youth as: "A person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent, legal guardian, or responsible adult and who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." To be considered an unaccompanied homeless youth, it is important that all three components of the definition-- age, connection to a parent or guardian, and housing status-- are met. The Commission recommends that all housing and services provided to unaccompanied youth be developmentally appropriate in five main areas of support: physical and mental health; connection to a caring adult; safety; education and employment; and civic engagement.



Identification and Connection

In order to understand the characteristics of unaccompanied youth in Massachusetts, the Commonwealth must improve our data collection. The Commission recommends the institution of a uniform statewide survey tool for identifying and counting these youth. Additionally, the Commission has developed a preliminary strategy for youth engagement with the use of the survey tool, understanding that young people are more likely to speak openly with other young people. Youth engagement will increase the likelihood of reaching more youth who are experiencing homelessness. All data collected should be analyzed for useful typologies of service needs and to promote youth access to such services. The Commission recommends a pilot youth count in at least 3 regions of the state that includes a 6-month pre-count strategy, which will be discussed more in the upcoming report. Such a count should include a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas.



Barriers to Serving Youth Under Age 18

The Commission identified the need to research and develop flexible, low-threshold housing and supportive programming options. There should be an inventory of current housing and services available to youth to emphasize on programs that have minimum entrance requirements to ensure services are available to young people with active substance abuse or mental health issues. Further, comprehensive training is recommended for all mandatory reporters about the system and requirement components of mandated reporting. Also, the Commission recommends enhancing the working relationship between community providers, schools, and state agencies serving these youth.



Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

Approximately 20-40% of young people experiencing homelessness have been rejected by their families or guardians due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, LGBTQ youth deserve careful consideration in terms of services and housing. The Commission recommends the use of LGBTQ-inclusive data collection methods across all youth-serving state agencies. The Executive Office of Health and Human Services should audit state policies to determine how they impact LGBTQ youths' access to public accommodations, health care, and identification documents. Additionally, there must be LGBTQ competency training and awareness campaigns within all state and youth-affected agencies. Finally, the Commission recommends an increase in number of LGBTQ-specific services in all aspects of the continuum of care for youth experiencing homelessness.



General Services and Housing

The Commission recommends an ongoing investigation of best practice service and housing modalities to ensure that young people are appropriately served. There must be a comprehensive analysis of existing resources by typology and gaps in services. In order to expand existing youth homelessness programs or to create innovative programs, the Commission recommends the funding of a minimum of three demonstration programs across the Commonwealth. Each program would be fully evaluated, so that we can further best practices and respond to service gaps. Some of the currently known service gaps include the dearth of affordable housing opportunities for youth; lack of access to transportation; lack of showers, public restrooms, and clothes washing facilities; and the inability of youth to obtain a valid ID without required documentation.