

## How Runaway & Homeless Youth Programs Support Youth Well-Being During and Beyond the Pandemic

### What We Did

At the *2020 Runaway and Homeless Youth Grantees National Training*, researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago partnered with a consultant and young adult leader with lived expertise in homelessness and systems for prevention and support. The group led a panel discussion on supporting runaway and homeless youth populations (RHY) amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives of the session were to (1) review “what we know,” e.g., emerging evidence about the effects of the pandemic on young people experiencing or at risk for homelessness (2) learn from RHY providers the pandemic’s impact on programs and service delivery (3) summarize both challenges to supporting RHY in the pandemic and efforts that facilitated effective support. Approximately 60 individuals participated. Participants provided input into potential training and technical assistance and resources warranting further exploration by RHYTTAC.

### What We Found

Breakout session participants raised several challenges, strategies, and knowledge gaps for serving youth experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

#### Challenges

- The pandemic made it harder for programs and staff to identify youth needing supports and to meet their needs.
- Connecting youth to housing and employment to exit homelessness is an everyday challenge exacerbated significantly by the pandemic.
- Program staff encountered challenges enforcing health measures, e.g., masking and social distance.
- The pandemic created higher demands amid a frightening environment of unknowns for staff, who worked tirelessly to show up, adapt, and support young people every day. Staff fatigue and burnout can make it more challenging for programs to maintain full staffing.

#### Strategies for Adaptation

- Programs employed creative strategies to support youth, leveraging technology, and using apps, social media, and texting to reach youth.
- Efforts to provide accurate and timely information to youth about the virus, local regulations, and health guidance and recommendations are critical to fostering safe behavior.
- Providers described the need to advocate for youth and staff most at risk for COVID-19 and to contour supports to young people who are affected directly (health) and indirectly (magnification of existing inequities).

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<sup>1</sup> The virtual nature of the training involved both advantages (the opportunity to “meet” virtually) and disadvantages. Participants were mostly unacquainted and there was some movement in and out of the virtual sessions, which likely affected overall comfort and engagement and comfort levels with sharing.

## What it Means

RHY programs implemented innovative strategies to respond to many challenges presented and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a clear and consistent call for more information sharing among RHY grantees and guidance about best practices for effective approaches to address program challenges in a pandemic or other future event or disaster. Given the findings, we raise a set of recommendations for exploring further through potential TTA offerings.

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Potential TTA response</b>	<b>Recommended actions</b>
Identifying and engaging youth who need services & supports	Opportunities for information sharing among RHY programs on <b>deploying creative strategies for fostering positive relationship-building</b> . Guidance on formalizing or <b>strengthening processes for emergency preparedness</b> and disaster planning.	Develop TTA for preparedness manuals and related tools in the event of future public health crises or natural disasters.
Connecting youth to housing and employment	Information, guidance, and resources to RHY Program grantees on <b>how to leverage COVID-19 relief/stimulus resources for additional resources</b> related to health, housing, and material needs, and to <b>use existing resources more creatively</b> .	Support creative use of resources (e.g., direct financial or rental assistance, mobile devices/plans, remote casework, etc.).
Enforce health and safety measures	TA to programs on <b>strategies for educating and influencing young people on safe behaviors</b> in response to COVID-19 circumstances, e.g., drawing on public health and health communications lessons.	Develop and implement shared strategies for increasing adoption of health safety measures.
Leverage technology to help adapt to the circumstances	Resources to help programs <b>use apps and social media</b> to engage youth. Opportunities for RHY programs to <b>share information on technologies and practices</b> .	Educate young people and staff about COVID-19 and how to know which media sources to trust.
Meet staff needs and maintain full staff capacity	Strategies to <b>alleviate staff stress and burden</b> , opportunities for <b>routine mental and physical health breaks</b> , and ways to <b>recognize staff</b> for “herculean” efforts.	Adjust staffing or programmatic operations to support staff health and safety.
Respond to the needs of youth with pre-existing medical conditions	Targeted training on <b>management of health conditions</b> and disabilities. Guidance on <b>advocating for youth</b> most at risk for COVID-19.	Explore vaccination priority for youth in congregate housing and others at increased risk.
Provide youth with timely and accurate information	TA on <b>collaborating with youth</b> both in programs and with lived experience of homelessness to develop and implement shared strategies for <b>improving young people’s access to information</b> and resources.	Use social media, peer influencers, and other communication channels that young people use and trust.

May 2021