ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

A Plan to Ensure Housing Safety and Stability for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in Polk County

December 2017

Polk County Continuum of Care Board and Youth Advisory Board: Our Voice Our Choice
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this plan is generously funded by the Mid-Iowa Health Foundation, whose mission is to serve as a catalyst and partner for improving the health of vulnerable people in greater Des Moines.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU ...

To the youth and young adults who participated in bi-weekly Youth Advisory Board: Our Voice Our Choice meetings. Your honesty, ideas and strength made this plan strong, real, and comprehensive.

To the Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC) for the vision to build a community that embraces and supports our youth and young adults.

To Youth Emergency Services and Shelter (YESS) for providing music and art therapy that allowed members of the Youth Advisory Board to express their views creatively.

To the following organizations for hosting work group meetings as part of the planning process: Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS), Anawim Housing, YESS, Polk County Health Department, and United Way of Central Iowa.

To the organizations and community members who took the time to work together to acknowledge the issues, address barriers, and create solutions that will work.

The development of the Polk County plan to end youth homelessness was facilitated by the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (YPPI) through a subcontract with Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC). YPPI conducted much of the data analysis and research, convened stakeholders and small groups, met regularly with the Youth Advisory Board, discussed issues and priorities with numerous individual partners, and drafted and formatted this report. HomeBase, a public interest law firm, provided technical assistance and support.

The Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (www.ypii.org) is a non-profit organization specializing in policies and programs affecting vulnerable and disconnected youth and young adults, with a particular interest in youth transitioning to adulthood.
A LETTER FROM THE POLK COUNTY CONTINUUM OF CARE BOARD CHAIR

As Chair of the Polk County Continuum of Care Board, I am pleased to support Ending Youth Homelessness: A Plan to Ensure Housing Safety and Stability for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability in Polk County.

Our community recognizes the importance of a home. A home provides a foundation to thrive in other parts of our lives-school, relationships, work, parenting. When our home is disrupted, everything becomes more difficult to maintain. We believe our young people deserve this foundation and opportunity to flourish.

We know that if we work together, we can make a home possible for all youth and young adults in our community. Over the past year, a committed group of youth and young adults, community leaders, funders, service providers, and advocates worked together to create a blueprint to end youth homelessness in Polk County. The plan prioritizes prevention, early support, pathways out of homelessness, and a commitment to eliminating structural barriers to housing stability.

This plan is comprehensive and will require participation from the entire community to be successful. We hope you will join us as we work to make Polk County a safe place that provides everyone support, safety and stable place to call home.

Sincerely,

Libby Nelson, Chair

[Signature]
A LETTER FROM THE YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD CO-CHAIR

My name is Clarissa Mejia, I am a junior at Grand View University, working on my Bachelor’s Degree in Social Work. I am also the co-facilitator of the Our Voice, Our Choice - Youth Advisory Board.

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Youth Advisory Board because I strongly support the plan to end youth homelessness. I experienced homelessness starting at the age of 13 years old. I struggled with couch surfing for seven years and had no support. Thankfully, I became a recipient of the Post Secondary Education Retention Program (PSERP) and now have a more stable life. Thanks to PSERP, I learned about the Youth Advisory Board and became involved.

The Youth Advisory Board is a unique and caring place to be twice a month. I enjoy listening to the stories of others and helping them find solutions. It’s also a great way to gain insight into what youth are currently struggling with, and allows us to come up with a plan that will effectively help these individuals.

The plan that has been proposed is highly important to me because I once struggled with homelessness and was affected terribly. I can see that there are so many other youth struggling and could use extra support. With this plan going into effect, it will create a change for thousands of youth undergoing homelessness in the Polk county area.

I hereby support the plan to end youth homelessness. No youth should have to experience living in the streets, wondering when their next meal is or wondering if they’re safe or not. I strongly believe this plan will be effective and will benefit many youth.

Sincerely,

Clarissa Mejia
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OUR VISION

Polk County will be a place that provides everyone support, safety, and a stable place to call home.

In 2012 the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness challenged communities across the country to end youth homelessness by 2020. With significant support from Mid-Iowa Health Foundation and the Polk County Continuum of Care Board, committed stakeholders and an active Youth Advisory Board in Polk County rose to the challenge to design a coordinated response to prevent and end youth homelessness in our community.

While this plan addresses youth homelessness, the Youth Advisory Board felt strongly that the Vision should be broader, understanding that everyone—their parents, their friends—deserves a home and everyone does better when we all have the opportunities we need.

Participating Organizations

- Anawim Housing
- Central Iowa Shelter & Services
- Children & Families of Iowa
- City of Des Moines Housing Services
- Community Support Advocates
- Des Moines Public Schools
- Dorothy's House
- Drake Head Start
- Freedom for Youth
- Goodwill of Central Iowa
- Institute for Community Alliances
- Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Iowa Department of Education
- Iowa Department of Human Services
- Iowa Homeless Youth Centers
- Iowa Legal Aid
- Iowa Safe Schools
- Joppa
- Judge Colin Witt
- Juvenile Court Services
- L.U.N.A. Iowa
- Mid-Iowa Health Foundation
- Orchard Place
- Polk County Community Youth & Family Services
- Polk County Continuum of Care Board
- Polk County Crisis & Advocacy
- Polk County Decategorization
- Primary Health Care
- U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development
- United Way of Central Iowa
- United Healthcare
- Young Women's Resource Center
- Youth Advisory Board
- Youth Emergency Services and Shelter
- Youth Policy Institute of Iowa

“Believe me and listen to what I have to say.”
—Youth Advisory Board member
Youth homelessness is complex and has characteristics that differ from adult homelessness. Family, community, and structural factors impact youth in many ways beyond their personal control. While homelessness looks different for each youth—and it is important to acknowledge and seek to understand each youth’s perspective and experiences—there are some frequently identified reasons youth find themselves housing insecure or homeless.

To design an effective response, it is critical to recognize and address these complex, and often interrelated factors associated with youth homelessness. Moreover, our strategies to prevent or end youth homelessness must reflect characteristics of positive youth development and include responses that meet the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults not often found in traditional adult homeless programs.

FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS
Families provide the foundation of human development and provide the safety and security youth need to thrive. Youth and young adults rely on family and friends to meet their developmental and social needs. When these connections are disrupted, or youth are traumatized by these experiences, typical development is disrupted. For youth—who are still dependent on families for their livelihood—conflicts or abuse and neglect that force them to leave home are traumatic and have negative consequences for school, relationships, and adolescent development. Youth on the Youth Advisory Board describe being “kicked out” of their homes due to conflicts with parents or parents’ partners. Many youth felt like they had no one to care for them and nowhere to turn.

ECONOMIC FACTORS
Many youth report that their family’s economic instability was a factor in their housing instability. While some youth wanted to remain with parents, it became more difficult for the parents to provide what they needed to thrive. Personal economic factors such as lack of employment, low paying work or limited employable skills are common factors on their own and also exacerbate other social and relationship causes. Additionally, the cost of essential needs such as child care, transportation, and food often creates instability and prevents youth from getting back on their feet after a crisis.

TRAUMA
Homelessness during adolescence is particularly troubling as young people are still developing intellectually, emotionally and socially. Youth who are homeless have often experienced trauma such as abuse, neglect, physical and sexual assault, and domestic violence. Trauma impacts brain development, behaviors,
coping skills, mental health and the ability to maintain relationships.

The trauma associated with being homeless, as well as the precursors to homelessness, have potentially long-term negative health, economic, and social impact. Youth who are homeless are highly vulnerable to additional victimization and trauma, including human and sex trafficking, sexual assault, and survival sex.

Services must be equipped to not only address housing needs, but must be able to address trauma and mental health needs, and provide youth opportunities to safely re-engage with families and social supports when it is safe and appropriate.

**Homeless Youth and Trauma**

- **59%** have been physically assaulted
- **64%** have been bullied
- **18%** have been a victim of a hate crime
- **31%** have been sexually assaulted
- **38%** have experienced domestic violence

*Source: Iowa Homeless Youth Centers, Emergency Beds Victim of Crime Act Report, August 1, 2016 - June 26, 2017*
UNDERSTANDING THE HOMELESS YOUTH POPULATION IN POLK COUNTY

For the purposes of this plan, our definition of “homeless youth” includes youth and young adults under age 25 who are unaccompanied or parenting (and their children) and meet any federal definition of homelessness.

For many youth and young adults in Polk County, losing a home is a harsh reality. In the 2015/2016 school year, nearly 1,500 students in Polk County were homeless and of those, 274 were unaccompanied (Iowa Department of Education). In 2016, 427 young adults ages 18-24 sought homeless services through Centralized Intake.

Based on the recent Voices of Youth Count report by Chapin Hall, one in ten young people ages 18-25 experienced homelessness and one in 30 youth ages 13-17 experienced a form of homelessness over a 12-month period.

Some subpopulations are more at risk of becoming homeless than others including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth (LGBT), black and Hispanic youth, pregnant and parenting youth, and youth who have been involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. (Chapin Hall, 2017)

YOUTH OF COLOR
Youth of color in Iowa are overrepresented in child welfare, foster care, and juvenile justice, and have disparate outcomes in education. Involvement in these systems increases the likelihood of becoming homeless. In Polk County school districts, 30% of homeless students are African American and 15% are Hispanic—far outnumbering their proportion in the county. Nearly 40% of youth ages 18-24 who are homeless are black (Homeless Management Information System, 2016), and LGBT youth of color are at a greater risk for homelessness.

Additionally, African-American youth are seven times more likely to be held in juvenile justice placement in Iowa (The Sentencing Project, 2017). While much work is being done locally in our public systems to reduce disproportionality and disparity for youth and families of color, resources for these initiatives are limited and collaboration and policy and practice change is needed.

YOUTH WHO IDENTIFY AS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL OR TRANSGENDER
Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC) reports that 16% of youth they serve identify as LGBT and 8% of respondents in Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) identify as LGBT. However, local providers believe this number is underreported. National data estimates suggest as many as 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT. Many LGBT youth are forced to leave their families due to emotional or physical abuse and/or rejection. LGBT youth are also overrepresented in the foster care system and are at greater risk of homelessness than their peers.

Point in Time Count - 2017

The Point in Time Count is a count of sheltered (emergency and transitional shelters) and unsheltered persons on a single night.

- 39 unaccompanied youth (ages 18-24)
- 4 unaccompanied minor youth (under 18)
- 12 parenting youth (ages 18-24) with 15 children of their own
non-LGBT peers. They are at increased risk of dropping out of school, abuse, depression, substance abuse, rape, and suicide (Lambda Legal).

SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH
Nearly half of the Youth Advisory Board members have been involved with the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. Youth involved in these systems—and particularly youth who age out of these systems—are at high risk of becoming homeless. Iowa Aftercare Services Network and National Youth in Transition Database data reveals that approximately 25% of youth who age out of foster care report becoming homeless before their 21st birthday. Youth who leave these systems at age 18 often do not have the positive social networks that improve stability and they report not having the opportunities to learn basic life skills or to develop a solid plan to equip them for the transition to adulthood. Additionally, many youth have developmental and intellectual delays or mental health challenges that can make it more difficult to maintain housing. While rental subsidies and family unification vouchers for these young people are available, eligibility is limited and barriers to utilization exist.

DOUBLED UP or PRECARIOUSLY HOUSED
Many unaccompanied youth and families with children “double up” or live with family members or friends if living with their parents is not an option. These youth are often captured in the public education homeless counts. While these youth may be receiving school support services, they are typically not eligible for housing services. Managing these relationships and dynamics can be difficult and youth who rely on this arrangement are vulnerable to crisis if relationships deteriorate. Housing instability can negatively impact academic performance, behaviors at school, transportation and mental health.

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS
In FY 2016, 43 unaccompanied minors in Polk County were entered into HMIS. Youth Emergency Services and Shelter served 214 youth under the federal Basic Center Program grant for Runaway and Homeless Youth. Youth included in that count are ages 9-17 who were homeless, runaways, or at risk of becoming homeless/runaways. Many of these youth are seeking safety from family conflicts including abuse and rejection from family. Our community is now faced with a reduction in Basic Center funding that will impact the ability of youth under 18 to access safety and shelter.

YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE PARENTING
Since the inception of Centralized Intake in September 2014, 1,639 (or 25%) of families that have been assessed had a head of household under age 25. Of the 427 youth who were homeless in 2016, 78 were parenting. Polk County has few family shelters and typically has 100 or more families on the waiting list. When family shelters are full, families who are literally homeless must make difficult choices about separating their families—perhaps taking their child to a youth shelter while the parent stays at an adult shelter. Too few housing options are available to families as they may not qualify for housing assistance or cannot find a home they can afford that meets their needs.

“
If I could say something about my experiences I would say … It’s stressful.
You don’t have the support group you need in this time of need. There are not a lot of resources, and the ones available have a long waiting lists, no funds, or short stay periods. When you are homeless it’s hard to stay healthy. It’s hard to work consistently because you don’t know if you’ll be on the east side or west side. It’s hard to go to school. It’s hard to stay out of trouble, making bad choices, jail, etc. It’s hard to be a parent the best way you can when you are trying to figure out where your children will sleep and eat. —Kyanna, letter to the mayor on what it’s like to be homeless
A STRONG FOUNDATION

Several organizations in Polk County are committed to providing services to youth and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These organizations offer a solid foundation on which we can further respond to youth homelessness in our community.

The Polk County Continuum of Care Board established a Centralized Intake process in 2014 and utilizes the Transition Age Youth Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (TAY-SPDAT). The tool helps identify and refer youth and young adults to appropriate homeless services and providers.

With three facilities and a bed capacity of 31, YSS-Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC) is the primary provider of services specifically for homeless youth ages 17-22 in the community. IHYC operates two transitional housing programs, one specifically for pregnant and parenting youth. In 2016, to further meet the specific needs of homeless youth, IHYC opened the Youth Opportunity Center, a drop in and emergency shelter in downtown Des Moines for youth experiencing homelessness and instability.

Central Iowa Shelter and Services, the largest emergency shelter for adults in Iowa that is often at capacity, provides substantial emergency services, case management and referral services to people over age 18. Youth Emergency Services and Shelter (YESS) operates a crisis nursery and emergency shelter for youth and children under age 18 and provides counseling and other supportive services for families. Additionally, the community has family and domestic violence shelters, but not enough to meet the need with more than 100 families on the waiting list.

Child welfare and juvenile justice systems in the community are actively working to strengthen families and improve young people’s transition from out-of-home placements to adulthood and community re-entry. Serving hundreds of young people from Polk County every year, these two systems play a critical role in supporting youth and families and preventing homelessness.

Finally, as the largest school district in Iowa, Des Moines Public Schools provides support and services to nearly one thousand homeless students, K-12.

Numerous other organizations provide support and services to youth and young adults in the community.

“There should be no short time period of staying there. You should be able to stay as long as you need to.” —Youth Advisory Board member
The impact of homelessness is severe, but ending youth homelessness is possible when communities work together.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this plan is to provide a blueprint for a comprehensive, coordinated response to meet the needs of youth and young adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Polk County. Additionally, the plan is an important catalyst to informing and educating the community about the unique strengths and needs of youth and young adults, and the community’s role in creating safety and stability to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.

We recognize that youth and young adults are not safe and secure one day and homeless the next day. The real story lies somewhere in between and often not by the youth’s choice—which provides us, the community, with the opportunity to alleviate crisis and intervene, as one youth said, “before things get bad.”

PROCESS
Between April and December 2017, more than 50 stakeholders from 35 organizations, and over 50 youth participated in this planning process. The process, which was made possible by a grant from the Mid-Iowa Health Foundation, was led by YSS-Iowa Homeless Youth Centers (IHYC) and the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa, with significant support and participation from the Polk County Continuum of Care Board, Iowa Department of Human Services, Juvenile Court Services, Des Moines Public Schools, and numerous public and private organizations.

Community stakeholders first met in April 2017 to launch the planning effort. Four work groups—prevention, housing and services, communication, and data and assessment—met over the ensuing months to explore strengths and opportunities for growth in the current system, analyze data, examine best practices, and develop recommendations for the plan. Participation from a wide range of stakeholders including youth ages 15-24, direct service providers, supervisors, policy makers, and directors allowed a deeper understanding of the personal daily challenges as well as the structural barriers that impact housing stability for youth and young adults.

PLANNING PRINCIPLES
- Authentic Youth Voice
- Housing First
- Trauma-informed Responses
- Positive Youth Development
- Cross-system Collaboration
A Plan to Ensure Housing Safety & Stability for Youth and Young Adults

The Youth Advisory Board, convened by Iowa Homeless Youth Centers, was formed in 2016 to advise IHYC’s policies and practices for its new drop-in and emergency shelter. The Board expanded its focus and grew larger with the youth homelessness planning process.

The purposes of the Youth Advisory Board were to:

1. Capture and understand the experiences of young people who have been homelessness;
2. Ensure that youth voice was a driving force in the development of the plan; and
3. Provide an opportunity for youth and young adults to socialize and develop strengths and skills not usually afforded to homeless or low-income youth.

Board members offered their expertise in a variety of ways. Early on, youth identified their priorities for the plan based on their own experiences and hopes for the future. Their priorities became the basis for discussions and considerations of stakeholders and work groups.

Throughout the planning process, the Youth Advisory Board contributed to evolving priorities and action steps; reviewed and provided feedback on the draft recommendations of the stakeholder and work groups; and provided their own recommendations. Youth also requested opportunities to socialize and connect with one another as an outlet for stress. Board members participated in a variety of activities including art and music therapy, a letter to the Mayor writing campaign, group dinners, games, and even wrote and recorded a song together with assistance from the YESS music therapist.

In addition to the Youth Advisory Board, youth under age 18 at YESS participated in a focus group sharing their hopes and dreams for their future and ideas about what they need from the community and service providers to reach their potential. Echoing their Youth Advisory Board peers, these youth expressed wanting to be heard, understood and treated with respect.

Top Priorities Identified by Youth Advisory Board

- Safety from sexual assault and violence
- Support from people who genuinely care and listen
- More safe places for youth to sleep at night
- Independence and self-sufficiency
- Opportunities to develop skills and build confidence
- Earlier intervention in family crisis and foster care
- Help finding permanent, affordable housing
KEY FINDINGS

Several important findings were revealed through an analysis of available data, examination of research and best practices, and the discussions based on the real-life experiences of the Youth Advisory Board and four work groups. The plan seeks to respond to these seven key findings.

1. Roughly 50% of youth accessing homeless services have experienced physical assault, sexual assault, or domestic violence—with many individual programs reporting even higher rates of victimization. Trauma impacts brain development, behavior, and often the ability to maintain safety and stability.

2. African-American youth make up 39% of the homeless youth population (ages 18-24), but only 6% of Polk County residents that age, making them significantly overrepresented in the homeless youth population. (Iowa Homeless Management Information System; U.S. Census Bureau)

3. There are few low-barrier crisis services or housing options specifically available to youth and young adults who are homeless. The youth emergency beds are typically full and family shelters have over 100 families on a waiting list.

4. Family conflict and instability are major causes of homelessness among youth and young families, and there are limited interventions available or accessible to address these situations and resulting trauma.

5. Up to 25% of youth who age out of Iowa’s foster care system report being homeless before their 21st birthday. (Iowa Aftercare Services Network, 2017; National Youth in Transition Database, 2013)

6. There are few accessible permanent supportive housing referral options that offer subsidy and support for youth through the Centralized Intake process. Youth and young adults are typically not eligible for permanent supportive housing options unless they fit the strict HUD definition for chronically homeless and have a qualifying disability.

7. The average monthly income of youth ages 18-24 who access homeless services is $698.00. The average rent metro wide in 2016 was $708 for studios, $766 for one-bedroom units, $834 for two-bedroom units and $1,120 for three-bedroom units (Des Moines Register, March 2016) making it very difficult for youth to afford housing without subsidy.

LEVEL OF COMMITMENT

13 Youth Advisory Board meetings
14 Work Group meetings
4 Large Group Stakeholders meetings
50+ Stakeholders collaborated
The goals and strategies in this plan are informed with input from the Youth Advisory Board, community stakeholders, research and examples from across the country, and data from multiple national and local sources.

YOUTH SYSTEMS MAP

Current and aspirational services and supports for youth and young adults designed by stakeholders as part of the planning process.
Organized under four priorities, the plan includes strategies to keep families safe and together when possible, intervene quickly when family is not an option, create pathways to a permanent home, and support community and system-level solutions that reduce barriers and increase opportunities for vulnerable populations. The plan recognizes that not one entity or organization can ensure that youth gain and maintain stability. Efforts must include the whole community.

The plan builds on the existing strengths of the community’s homeless services infrastructure and sets goals to expand and improve positive youth development supports and opportunities available to youth. The plan recognizes the complex interplay between individual, family, community, and society, and the importance of simultaneously implementing strategies across multiple levels to create change. For example, allowing youth to heal from trauma takes time, energy, support, and therapeutic services, yet many housing programs are time limited and may lack trauma-informed services and support. The plan seeks to more closely align policies and programs with best practices.

YOUTH ARTWORK
During the planning process, Youth Advisory Board members had the opportunity to create a personal “flag” depicting their emotions and dreams. The artwork shared here offers a glimpse of their reality.
The best way to eliminate youth homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place. Youth are less likely to become homeless when families can meet their needs. Youth and families interact with many systems, organizations, and people in the community. These are all opportunities to connect with, and support youth and families before they reach a crisis. Prevention efforts must include strategies to ensure youth and young adults have a strong, expanded and diverse network of family—given or chosen—and friends to rely on for safety and stability.

**Strategies**

1) Keep families safe and together, whenever possible.

1.1 Increase access to evidence-based (and evidence-informed) family therapies that support positive family connections, build problem-solving and communication skills, and address youth substance abuse and other maladaptive behaviors.

1.2 Explore the feasibility of developing a child welfare service such as family mediation accessible to families with older youth without requiring an open child welfare case.

1.3 Support efforts of the Mental Health Crisis Planning group to create a mental health crisis line, mobile crisis team and crisis observation center for youth and families so families know where to go for help.

1.4 Increase availability and accessibility of parenting support, parent education, and other child abuse prevention programs and initiatives.

2) Ensure that youth who are involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have the social networks, skills, and resources needed to gain and maintain stable housing before exiting care.

2.1 Expand family-like connections for youth in care.

   i. Increase the number of quality family foster homes for older youth and the number of adults willing to serve as guardians for youth approaching legal adulthood.

   ii. Increase the use of permanency round tables and other permanency strategies for older youth.

   iii. Establish formal practices to help youth understand and resolve issues with family members before leaving care.

   iv. Educate Guardians Ad Litem, judges, attorneys and others about the needs of youth as they exit care—particularly in relation to family dynamics and safe re-engagement with families.

2.2 Promote adolescent brain development, self-determination, and positive relationships by:

   i. Ensuring youth have quality Youth Transition Decision Making (YTDM) meetings, focusing
on thorough identification and engagement of at least one informal long-term support person through the process.

ii. Effectively implementing the normalcy provisions of the Strengthening Families Act.

2.3 Seek resources to expand efforts of Juvenile Court Services (JCS) and Department of Human Services (DHS) to increase the use of evidence-based family interventions such as Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy and Functional Family Therapy into service provision.

2.4 Build an active network of JCS and DHS staff and contractors, homeless service providers and others to build skills, knowledge, resources and connections to effectively work with transition-age youth.

3) Identify and support vulnerable students and their families.

3.1 Develop a working group of Polk County school homeless liaisons to identify, share and implement best practices to serve vulnerable students.

3.2 Develop partnerships between Polk County Continuum of Care Board members and school districts that provide cross-discipline learning opportunities between schools (faculty, students, administrators) and homeless service providers.

3.3 Develop a community solution to identify and expand resources and supports for students meeting the Federal Department of Education definition of homelessness.

YOUTH ARTWORK
The need for “safety” was a recurring theme in the artwork created by the Youth Advisory Board members.
Intentionally and swiftly connecting youth and young adults to low-barrier, youth-appropriate services and supports will ensure youth have a safe and stable place to stay, reduce the length of time youth experience homelessness, and minimize the trauma of homelessness.

**Strategies**

1) **Improve identification and referral of youth experiencing homelessness and youth at risk of homelessness to available services.**

   1.1 Develop a screening tool and referral protocol for use by jails, hospitals, schools, doctor’s offices, etc. to identify and refer youth who are at high risk of homelessness that includes mental health, physical health and safety status.

   1.2 Assess the Centralized Intake process for youth friendliness and cultural competency, and explore options to prioritize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBT) youth, gender nonconforming (GNC) youth, youth of color, and other overrepresented populations for services.

   1.3 At intake, screen youth for human trafficking, sexual assault, domestic violence, physical violence and substance abuse, and immediately connect them to needed supports and services.

   1.4 Build a relationship between United Way 211 resource line and Centralized Intake to establish referral protocol for youth experiencing crisis/homelessness.

   1.5 Create by-name list of homeless youth through Polk County Continuum of Care Board work group to ensure youth are quickly connected to case management services and other supportive services and relationships.

   1.6 Increase communication and collaboration between under age 18 service providers and over age 18 service providers, to maximize resources and facilitate access to services.

2) **Increase the number and availability of welcoming, youth-focused safe places for youth to sleep and/or engage in services**

   2.1 Develop a mechanism for unaccompanied youth under 18 to more easily access shelter and housing services.

   2.2 Evaluate current family intervention protocols that allow youth to re-establish connections with family or friends (when safe) through Centralized Intake or while in shelter, and expand number of evidence-based practices as needed.

   2.3 Seek resources to dedicate emergency shelter beds specifically for young adults and extend the hours of drop-in centers for youth.

> “I don’t reach out. I don’t trust people.”
> – Youth Advisory Board member
A clear path out of homelessness is essential to meet the needs of families and unaccompanied youth and young adults. The array of housing options should reflect positive youth development principles and include opportunities for independence, socialization, safety, and stability. Housing options should be low-barrier, strengths-based, not time limited when possible, and utilize trauma-informed responses as a model of care.

Strategies

1) Utilize and build on existing housing resources.

1.1 Evaluate feasibility of prioritizing and dedicating permanent supportive housing units for youth, young adults and young families.

1.2 Expand housing resources for youth who are doubled up; either living with family, friends, or other non-relatives and do not qualify for housing under HUD eligibility.

1.3 Expand Rapid Rehousing programs—particularly longer term (12-18 months)—to rapidly connect youth and young families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing with supportive services and financial support.

1.4 Create a “Youth Housing Coordinator” position that works specifically with youth and young adults under age 25.

2) Expand housing options that reflect needs of young adults who have had juvenile justice and child welfare involvement.

2.1 Develop a pilot project with a cohort model to provide permanent housing with support for youth aging out of care—with subsidized rent through Family Unification Program, Preparation for Adult Living (PAL), or rent subsidy through Iowa Finance Authority.

2.2 Encourage review of state rules for PAL and Iowa Finance Authority rent subsidy to expand eligibility and lessen disincentives to living with parents.

2.3 Evaluate the utilization and access to Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers to maximize its use for transitioning youth.

2.4 Explore housing options for youth who have felonies, sex offenses, mental health challenges and other barriers that preclude them from many housing solutions.

3) Address barriers to housing stability

3.1 Increase access to Iowa Legal Aid’s legal advocacy program that works with youth to obtain expungements, renter rights educations, and other legal remedies to remove barriers.

3.2 Increase the number of employer-based partnerships who will commit to hiring and training youth and young adults.

3.3 Ensure that youth attending postsecondary institutions are connected to on-campus housing options.

3.4 Explore resources to provide apartment application and deposit fees to young adults.
Building organizations and systems within our community to provide opportunities, services and supports that are helpful, trauma informed, culturally appropriate and responsive to the individual and developmental needs of all youth is everyone's responsibility. It is particularly important to reorient policies and practices to address the systemic and cultural challenges that create overrepresentation of youth of color and youth who identify as LGBT in the homeless population.

1) Address/reduce overrepresentation of youth of color who are homeless.
   1.1 Hire and grow new leaders of color in homeless service organizations.
   1.2 Adopt and implement a set of protocols and best practices for serving youth of color.
   1.3 Train housing and service providers on racial equity and implicit bias.
   1.4 Increase the number of people of color on the Polk County Continuum of Care Board to reflect the population the Board serves.
   1.5 Commit to courageous conversations about race and homelessness in our families, our agencies, and our community.
   1.6 Support and work with public systems and other community initiatives that seek to address racial disproportionality and disparity.

2) Improve the quality of services and supports available to youth and young adults.
   2.1 Assess existing programs against best practices and positive youth development principles and promote and support application to ensure the services and supports available are in line with what youth need and ask for, and reflect effective practice.
   2.2 Offer supports and services until youth reach self-identified successful independence.
   2.3 Develop Polk County Continuum of Care Board-level and organization-level protocols for serving LGBT youth.
   2.4 Ensure that programs and services coordinate and provide connections to physical health, mental health, education, and employment services for homeless youth.
   2.5 Continue to build and collaborate with the Youth Advisory Board for program and policy improvements.
   2.6 Train housing and service providers on cultural inclusiveness, heteronormativity bias, social class bias and sexism.

3) Reduce structural and community barriers to housing stability.
   3.1 Advocate for safe, affordable and accessible housing in Polk County, including suburbs. Collaborate with other community initiatives including the United Way of Central Iowa OpporUnity Plan to:
i. Increase the number of existing rental units that are accessible and affordable to households making less than 30% of the Average Median Income (AMI).

ii. Increase the number of new rental units that are affordable to households making less than 30% of AMI.

3.3 Advocate for a living wage that matches the real costs of living and working in the metro area.

3.4 Build on One Economy: Building Opportunity for All, The State of Black Polk County report to focus on efforts to improve the lives of black youth and families.

3.5 Advocate with the City of Des Moines to prioritize people who are homeless in Section 8 and public housing vouchers.

3.6 Advocate for extension of foster care from age 18 to 21 to ensure safety and stability for these emerging adults.

I Am A Fighter

You don't know what his life's been like
Maybe he's been pushed around, or beaten down
And maybe she's made a few mistakes
But that's not who she is; she's not her choices

We are all people just trying to move forward
Don't judge me by my past,
'cause the future I'm looking toward

I am a fighter, a survivor
I will knock down the barriers;
I'll show you my strength
I am the future; I am my own
Where I've come from doesn't destine who I am
We are strong; We are strong

At the bottom I found my life
In the rubble, through the struggle
Just look up and you'll see the light
That can guide your way, get you through the day

We are all people just trying to move forward
Don't judge me by my past,
'cause the future I'm looking toward

I am a fighter, a survivor
I will knock down the barriers;
I'll show you my strength
I am the future; I am my own
Where I've come from doesn't destine who I am
We are strong; We are strong

I'll keep on, keep fighting
I'll keep on, keep climbing
I'll keep on, keep breathing
I'll keep on believing

Through music therapy, Youth Advisory Board members wrote these song lyrics.
NEXT STEPS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

IMPLEMENTATION
Effective implementation of this community plan will require ongoing leadership and commitment from stakeholders. Continued involvement of an active Youth Advisory Board will also be instrumental to successful implementation.

With a comprehensive plan now available, the next step will be the formation of a Youth Work Team under the auspices of the Polk County Continuum of Care Board. This group will be responsible for maintaining momentum for the plan’s strategies by developing time lines, convening stakeholders as needed, working with providers and organizations, identifying and leveraging resources, and tracking and communicating overall progress, challenges and impact to the Polk County Continuum of Care Board and broader community.

Stakeholders identified the top five most important strategies and action steps to accomplish in the next six months to one year. This will serve as the starting point for the youth work team.

MEASURING PROGRESS
Stakeholders recommend that data currently collected and reported by the Polk County Continuum of Care Board for the overall homeless population be disaggregated for the youth homeless population on a regular basis as a primary means of tracking and communicating progress.

These indicators include:
- Count of unsheltered
- Exits from homelessness to safe and stable housing

These measures can be supplemented with data from other systems, such as education, child welfare, and juvenile justice, and further informed by program-level administrative data as needed. Real-life experiences of individual homeless youth could provide a more complete narrative to further inform policy and practice changes by all of these systems.

FINAL THOUGHTS
Youth and young adults facing homelessness and housing instability have no choice but to fight and break down the barriers that face them. From family and economic instability, to trauma and mental health challenges—we can't let them do it alone. As a community, it is our responsibility to invest in the health and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens and to dedicate the resources it takes to help them thrive. With collaboration, and this plan as our blueprint, we can prevent and end youth homelessness in Polk County.

“I am a fighter, a survivor, I will knock down the barriers. I will show you the strength I have.”
– Youth Advisory Board member
REFERENCES

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