Unlocking the Potential of Homeless Older Adolescents

FACTORS INFLUENCING CLIENT SUCCESS IN
FOUR NEW ENGLAND TRANSITIONAL LIVING PROGRAMS

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We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the four agencies profiled in this report, and the staff members who so generously shared their experience and insights.

The Project

This report investigates factors contributing to the effectiveness of four federally funded transitional living programs (TLPs) in New England. The project was led by New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services, a regional provider of training and technical assistance to TLPs, and conducted in early 2004 by a team of graduate students from Tufts University in Medford, Mass. The report is meant to complement the federal government's ongoing effort to understand TLP outcomes by offering the views and perspectives of the service providers themselves. In most cases, these providers are uniquely positioned to identify the many local and programmatic issues that work for and against positive client outcomes, and thus their views are indispensable to any discussion of the effectiveness of TLPs in general, and of course their own in particular.

The nation's federally funded TLPs help homeless adolescents finish their education, grapple with drug or alcohol problems, find jobs, secure permanent housing and otherwise transition successfully into adulthood. Attempts to measure the success of these programs have always been difficult, primarily due to the inability to track the progress of young people are often remain transient after leaving the programs. The long-term impact of the TLPs – their ability to make a true difference in the lives of troubled young people – requires longitudinal study, the challenges of which have been, and remain, daunting.

Nevertheless, the question remains: Are these programs successful? Programs can and in fact are required to describe the services they provide to clients – drug counseling and job training, for instance – and on immediate outcomes for clients – whether they found jobs, secured housing, got a GED or high school diploma. As basic and necessary as such information is, everyone acknowledges that as indicators of success, such data is necessarily limited, and at best can tell only part of the story.

This study makes two assumptions: 1) that definitions of client success in fact vary from program to program; and 2) that overall program success – captured in statistics on the number of youth who successfully complete the program or make safe exits from the program – is influenced by many factors, including program intake; program design; client access to supporting services; the willingness of the program to admit "hard-to-serve" youth; the program's geographical setting and the economic status of its surrounding community; and its relationship to state child-welfare systems. Measuring the success of these programs is an important endeavor, but all these factors, combined with the complexity of the youth population served by TLPs, make "success" an extremely difficult concept to define and measure. By conducting in-depth interviews with staff at four TLPs in New England, we set out to explore each program's rather complicated view of client success – views necessarily influenced by community factors, program resources, and of course by the young people themselves.

Currently, 189 TLPs receive financial support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), a program of the federal Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In an effort to evaluate the success of its TLP program, FYSB developed and continually evaluates data generated by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS), to which grantee agencies contribute data quarterly. Two of the statistics the data

yields – the percentage of youth who exit TLPs to a safe place, and the percentage who complete the program successfully – have understandably been of particular interest to FYSB. The agency considers a "safe" exit one in which the participant has completed the program successfully or has a place to go in the event of a premature departure from the program. An "unsafe" exit is one in which a participant dropped out or left the program before completion and does not have a place to go for the night after he or she leaves.

Methodology

This report is based on on-site interviews conducted by graduate students with TLP staff at four New England sites. Questions followed a flexible protocol covering basic program information, program intake, residents, services, community services, program expectations, staff, staff-resident relationships, and the use and meaning of program statistics. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The information was then compiled and conclusions were drawn about the range of factors that appear to contribute to client and program success. All participating agencies were promised anonymity. While some would have gladly contributed to the project without such a guarantee, our goal was to create an atmosphere where staff would feel free to speak frankly about their programs and the conditions, positive and negative, under which they operate. All agencies have been given pseudonymous names, and certain identifying characteristics, such as street names and local place names, have been changed or eliminated.

YouthAscent
An Urban Agency with a No-Nonsense Approach

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

YouthAscent, the transitional living program of a large urban agency in New England, is designed to provide housing and case management services to motivated youth aged 18 to 22 who would otherwise be homeless. The program is eleven years old, and is funded primarily by FYSB, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the United Way and the state.

The program has various sites scattered throughout the state. Three of them function as traditional TLPs, while a fourth works with teen parents. The goal of these programs is to create an environment where residents can actively pursue independence while gaining experience and skills that will be useful both during the program and afterward. The average length of stay in the program is one year, although residents are allowed to stay for up to eighteen months. Referrals to the TLP come from shelters, health service providers, schools and the agency's own outreach workers, which staff credit with creating a "good street presence" for the program.

PROGRAM INTAKE

'WE'RE PROBABLY TOUGHER THAN THE AVERAGE TLP'

The application and intake process at YouthAscent involve several chronological steps that occur within a two-week period. At a youth's first meeting with program staff, the staff explain the guidelines of the program and gather as much information as possible about the current situation of the applicant. At this point, most youth show interest in joining the program. Within 24 to 48 hours of this initial meeting, staff begin the intake process with the applicant, gathering relevant background information and making an initial assessment. During the next few days, staff review the client's application. Caseworkers also complete a criminal-records check on the applicant, and provide him or her with several forms to fill out, including a life-skills assessment, a parenting/pregnancy prevention assessment, and reference request forms. Reference request forms are sent to three individuals who know the applicant well and can vouch for his or her ability and willingness to succeed in the TLP. Since a physical examination is required to enter the program, staff also provide the applicant with a list of health care providers offering free or low-cost physicals. Throughout the intake process, youth are expected to check in at least daily, if not several times during the day, so that caseworkers know they are safe and serious about the program.

Youth must secure employment as a prerequisite for admission into the TLP; even a client who is attending school full time is expected to work at least fifteen hours a week. While the TLP does not provide official job-skills training, the program staff will assist clients in others ways, conducting mock job interviews to work on communication skills or helping a client get a birth certificate so that he or she can apply for a job.

At the next two meetings, the applicant's remaining paperwork is reviewed and a substance abuse evaluation and drug screening are administered. Applicants who test positive for drugs are not automatically refused admission to the program, but are required to meet with a substance abuse counselor. That counselor's recommendation for treatment then becomes a condition of admission to the program.

After the drug screening, the applicant meets with a caseworker to set long-term goals. Upon completion of this process, the caseworker will determine whether the applicant will be accepted. If the client is deemed a poor fit for the program, the caseworker will reject the application with specific details about why the client was denied admission and what he or she can do in order to reapply to the program. Grounds for automatic rejection include the following: legal issues such as a bench warrant (although the program will work with prospective clients in this area if the issue is not serious); unstable mental health status; suicidal ideation; and active psychosis. Issues that would make a client less likely to gain entry are: violent behavior, a positive drug test, and intolerance for individuals of other races, religions or sexual orientations.

Caseworkers may also be reluctant to admit youth who are coming from foster care. According to one staff member:

Some foster care kids have real entitlement issues. They have spent their lives having somebody take care of them. And their survival skill has been that when a problem gets bad, make sure it is bad enough so that the social worker finds you a new place to live. They tend to be very dramatic, very black and white. If they don't like something they say, 'I couldn't possibly do this.' Well, you don't have any options in the TLP.

If the client is deemed appropriate for entry into the program, the caseworker will set up an appointment for the client to meet a Resident Assistant (RA) and potential future roommates. An overnight visit with the RA and roommates serves as a trial period, after which the youth will either sign a contract to begin the program or find alternative arrangements. If the client decides to enter the program, he or she begins a thirty-day probationary period.

Approximately one-third of youth who begin this extensive intake process fail to complete it, and staff report that the majority who decide to self-select out do so because of the strict program requirements. There has only been one case when a youth was denied admission after a program visit; that applicant was uncomfortable with the sexual orientation of a potential roommate and threatened to assault him during the night.

One staff member, summing up the intake process, said:

We are very tough in our screening process, probably tougher than the average TLP.... If what you are looking for is somebody to give you stuff, that is what our street outreach program does. It gives you anything – food, access to shelters. TLP is really seen as the way you can get stuff for yourself.... If you really want to accomplish something and transition to independence, that is TLP.

PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS

'THE BAR IS HIGH'

Program staff emphasize that the TLP is neither a welfare program nor a shelter. Youth are expected to make things happen for themselves without much assistance. The program requires that youth must be continually employed for 35 or more hours a week, or 15 hours for full-time students. In addition, residents must remain drug- and alcohol-free and live cooperatively with roommates and their RA. They are not allowed to have overnight guests. Youth must also contribute a certain percentage of their earnings toward household expenses and a savings account. Clients are expected to participate in monthly life-skills groups with other young adults, and these groups often focus on money management, home safety, legal issues and budgeting. One staff member explained why the program has so many requirements: "If the bar is that high, the kid is really putting their all into succeeding."

PROGRAM STAFF

LOW STAFF TURNOVER, DELINEATION OF ROLES BENEFITS RESIDENTS

The program employs two full-time case managers and eight resident assistants (RAs) who obtain free housing with their position but otherwise receive no salary. RAs are considered by staff to be the "front line" of the program. All other staff and services are provided by related agency programs. Most staff, except for the RAs in male apartments, are young, female college graduates. Many have had previous experience working in group homes.

For employees with a bachelor's degree, the starting salary is $25,500-$30,000 per year, depending on experience. Employees receive cost-of-living raises, and have some potential to move up within the agency. When asked about the staff turnover rate, one employee responded, "Surprisingly, we have been pretty stable, despite the fact that it's a tough job. For the most part, staff tend to last at least three years and turn around with the grant." Staff say that this continuity helps program participants succeed.

Staff stress that their relationships with clients is often the most important determinant of individual success. Staff play various roles in a client's life. RAs, for instance, fill a "big brother/big sister" function:

They may offer advice, but a participant is free to blow it off. They can ask questions, but they don't have to be answered. They assume the role of a responsible roommate. It is recommended that they try not to come across as an authority figure, because it's so obvious that they are the authority figure. They are not employees and that is a huge difference. Most RAs come up with a style that works for them, and there is certainly some compromising. For the most part, RAs have tended to be young, which allows for a connection.

The case manager's job, on the other hand, "is really about enforcing rules. If there is going to be any transference of parenting, it's going to be the caseworker who is going to enforce the rules, hold you accountable, have high expectations, help you when you need help, kick you when you need to be kicked." Of all staff, case managers are expected to establish and maintain the clearest boundaries:

If there is somebody who is going to break a boundary, it's going to be the RA. The RA has the more difficult relationship, but with only the two to three kids they live with. The case manager would have as many as eight kids, and has to be all about the rules, but at same time be warm, empathetic and trusting.

PROGRAM RESIDENTS
WHATEVER THEIR TROUBLES, NO 'HANDHOLDING'

Program participants come from the three northern New England states. Eighty-five percent of program participants are white. Approximately 40 percent of current residents have been in the foster care system, while between 50 and 60 percent have been involved in the justice system. The program estimates that 70 percent of clients have some contact with a family member. For some youth, time in the program is a necessary respite from a tumultuous family relationship. But other participants, particularly immigrant youth, stay firmly connected, even to the point of sending their paychecks back home to their families.

Some residents of the TLP are obviously easier to serve than others. Factors that can make a resident hard to serve include mental health issues, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, and an unwillingness or inability to maintain employment. The program rejects many hard-to-serve youth up front:

If you are going to compare TLPs, we would probably serve fewer overall hard-to-serve kids than a TLP that is set up by a state with a combined TLP/ILP format, because the way that those systems are set up, they have more staff and departments. They could probably care for more hard-to-serve clients.

Ironically, staff believe that those hard-to-serve youth who do become residents are more likely to succeed in their program "because they have not been hand-held and maintained (by a state system) in the past." One such hard-to-serve client was "J."

J. was an addict, and initially very arrogant. He became homeless because his alcoholic mother didn't have the strength to say no to the crack addict dad who was getting out of jail at the time. J. had entered recovery six months prior to his dad's departure from jail. J. knew enough, and had a sponsor strong enough, to say 'You can't live there, you will go right back to the cycle (of addiction)'. His mother then says, 'Well, you are on your own; there is nothing I can do. Your father needs me.'

J. tried to become independent by living with his sponsor for a while; that didn't work. He lived with this friend and that friend, what we call 'couch-surfing,' where you don't know where you are going to be, but can stay on some friend's couch. J. applied to us through his connections with the school; he was not yet graduated. J. came to us with the whole 'I'm working the program, I'm working the twelve steps, you need to take care of me.' In essence he believed, 'I'm doing all the right things and the world owes me something.' The hard-to-serve part of his experience was him grasping that he needed to obtain a job, pay rent and do everything he needed to do for his addiction, and stay clean for case management in order for him to learn to live on his own. There was quite a bit of handholding, give-and-take in terms of getting him to meetings, which he felt was the

most important thing, and getting him to agree that the house meeting, which takes place at the same time as his favorite NA meeting, had to come first..

By being required to attend house meetings, J. felt that the TLP was putting other residents' welfare ahead of his own. He came close to relapsing several times:

He calls it a 'mental relapse.' He would stop going to meetings; his angry attitude and behavior would start coming back; he would be dishonest and break program rules. Things got to a point that he thought the no-overnight-guest rule meant solely no sex in the apartment, and that it was okay for him to have all of his guy friends sleep over.

Finally J. was asked to leave program. He was shocked. His reaction was, "You can't do that to me, I haven't used drugs, you can't kick me out." Any expelled resident can reapply after thirty days. During those thirty days, J. stayed connected and figured out what he needed to do in order to gain reentry. "J. completely turned his attitude around. He became serious about the rules. After that he did pretty well, stuck with the program and completed the full eighteen months." Some time later, the program asked J. to speak at a homelessness conference and share his story. J. told the audience, "I had to do it for myself."

For staff, it was the best possible thing a program participant could say.

I think the best compliment to a TLP worker is no compliment at all. Because if the only way that you survived was because of someone else, how the hell are you going to survive when you leave here?

COMMUNITY SERVICES
EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS, BUT NO HOUSING OPTIONS

Residents work in a variety of service-sector jobs, with many becoming certified nursing assistants. The city recently lost a large factory that had employed a number of program participants. For the most part, though, clients are successful in finding and maintaining employment when offered consistent opportunities. Some clients use their time at TLP to pursue various career paths in attempt to find the best fit.

Around half the TLP residents are enrolled in an educational program of some sort (high school, a GED program, or classes at the college level). Case managers monitor school attendance and progress and attempt to keep the participant on track to graduate. Following successful completion of high school or a GED program, a TLP participant is given a free month's rent.

YouthAscent's TLP residents are lucky in terms of their educational options. Program staff noted that the local public school system is among the best in the state. The city has three public high schools, each with its own alternative school. Residents may also attend vocational courses at a local school of technology. Youth have a choice of three GED programs, two of which also teach vocational skills.

Despite the opportunities, obtaining an education is not easy for program participants. One staff member described the difficulties youth face:

In order to complete high school, they have to balance a lot of stuff. (In the program) they are required to work and pay rent, just like a kid not in high school. Their rent is a lot cheaper, but it is still the concept. Most kids have a hard time organizing, balancing and committing to the multitude of tasks they need to complete. Also, if they have a history of homelessness, a lot of them have huge gaps in their education.

The agency offers substance abuse and mental health counseling, adoption services, family counseling, court-order programs and a summer camp. Clients can also access other services outside the program, but they are somewhat scarce.

As in most cities, securing affordable housing upon leaving the program is a major obstacle for clients. Although some low-income housing is available in the city, families get first priority. Furthermore, most program participants fail to qualify for Section-8 housing assistance because they are single homeless adults. According to staff, "The best skill that participants have learned is how to live with a group of people, since that arrangement is the only thing that is available to them (after they leave the program)."

The city has public transportation, but it is only available until early evening. As a result, most residents need a car in order to get to and from their place of employment. One staff member said, "A kid will put every dollar that they have into a car. This means that they can work outside the bus route, which increases their earnings by 50 percent. Also, you can live in your car." Program staff could only remember one participant who did not own a car, and that person was planning on attending college in Boston.

Overall, staff say the community offers a variety of services that are useful to program residents. Many of those services come as a result of the agency's partnerships.

PROGRAM SUCCESS
A THIRD OF CLIENTS COMPLETE ALL THEIR GOALS

During the fiscal year 2002-2003, about three-quarters of YouthAscent residents made a safe exit; on this measure, the program ranks near the bottom of federally funded TLPs. During this same period, over 40 percent of program participants completed the program; on this measure, the agency ranks in the top half of agencies reporting in 2003.

If those statistics alone determined program success, YouthAscent would appear to be doing a mediocre job. But the numbers are misleading. That's because high-barrier programs take in such relatively high-functioning youth that residents have the wherewithal to simply move on without detailing their plans to a caseworker, meaning their exits look "unsafe" when they actually may not be. (It may also be the case that comparisons between TLP exit rates are simply invalid, because many programs with better rates may actually be sending youth on to an adult shelter, hardly a desirable outcome.) Whether or not either of these factors explain the program's relatively low safe-exit rate, the program considers itself successful. When asked to provide an example of a client who did well in the program, a staff member told the story of "K.":

She was a cutter, and there were a lot of mental health issues. K. was self-described as very, very

sick. She was exceptionally bright. She took the contract seriously, and called twice a day for the first couple months of the program, just to check in. Then she lost her job. K. got hired at a community mental health center working with adults with huge disabilities. Within the first week of the job she just clicked. She realized that she wasn't as sick as she thought she was. From that point on she finished her schooling and she got into college, where she created a major that they didn't have. The experience of committing to a job where all of a sudden she was asked to be the helper instead of the one being helped totally changed her viewpoint. That was particularly rewarding. K. was an exception and on the extreme end of how visibly you can change. For me, her story really connects what we are trying to do with our kids.

When asked to define successful outcomes for residents, a staff member said:

The goal is independence. Graduates should gain independent housing through their own accord, which they have been able to find and afford post-TLP. This could be living back with their parents, obtaining their own apartment, an apartment with friends, or they qualify for subsidized housing. This is not a return to couch-surfing. This is pretty much what we focus on as the ultimate goal.

'I think the best compliment to a TLP worker is no compliment at all. Because

if the only way that you survived was because of someone else, how the hell

are you going to survive when you leave here?'

The program's other main measure of success is whether participants meet the goals they outlined at intake. Almost a third of TLP clients do complete all of their goals by the time they leave the program, going back out into the world with "a whole set of skills they didn't have before."

The worst-case scenario is a client exiting to a shelter or returning to the street. But even that doesn't have to be the end of the world:

They can reapply to us and come back. That is a really great message to give a kid: that the program can be the home that participants can come back to. If you look at your middle class families, after the kids go off to college they come back and they stay until they are 26 and 28 years old. Then take a kid in a high-risk situation and somehow they are supposed to be completely independent. OK, we create this TLP program and give them 18 months of help. We have had kids who come back to visit when the college dorms are closed. And that works out great. Just that home base.

Staff like their current methods of determining success "because it really lets the kid tell us whether they were successful or not. The kid comes in and during that two-week intake process they tell us what they mean by successful." For some, this may not mean finishing the program but exiting the program when they have saved a certain amount of money. This is success because:

The kid has to set the goal – 'I don't want 18 months of handholding, I want a place that's cheap enough that I can put enough money aside and get my first apartment.' If they define that as suc-

cess, they have met their goals. Whereas if we had to fire off these standards: 'All the social workers agree that what you need to call successful is …,' that might not be the kid's version.

Despite their general satisfaction with the program, if staff could make one improvement, they would add a shelter:

I'd like to have a young adults' shelter where the kid could be in a safe bed during the application process and return to that safe bed when they couldn't do the apartment goals. That way they could reapply and still be in a contained system of care. As it is now, it really is 'goodbye' (during the two-week intake process) and hope that they stay connected. Once they are not in the housing they could choose to do anything…. It would be easier on the case workers to say 'You have to leave now' if it meant you had to go to our safe shelter.

Program staff also wish there were more housing options available after participants complete the program.

'A kid will put every dollar that they have into a car. This means that they can work outside the bus route, which increases their earnings by 50 percent. Also, you can live in your car."

It would be great to be able to do a spend-down: yes, here's your eighteen months in the program, but because you've completed TLP we now have this magic grant that would offer a kid over the following eighteen months payment options of 75 percent of your rent, then 70 percent, then 50 percent, so the kid is becoming increasingly financially independent.

When asked how the agency could improve its TLP, a staff member pointed to the need for more resources:

We could probably spend a whole lot more money and improve a small number of the kids. I think one of the things I love best about our program is that we are so damn cheap. We do a nice job with a majority of the kids we work with for not a whole lot of federal money. We are efficient with what we do. That being said, it's frustrating to say no to kids who need a whole lot of services who aren't going to make it through our application process.

YouthNetWorks, Inc.
Small, Rural and in Search of Structure

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

YouthNetWorks has been serving at-risk and homeless teens in this small town in southern New England for more than 25 years. Indeed, the agency has earned a reputation as a nexus for area youth. "This is a small place," one staff member commented. "We've been around for a long time, and we have become known as a place where kids go." That reputation is due, in part, to the agency's ability to effectively market its services – which include a drop-in center and teen hotline – in the community. Most clients are "self-generated primarily through outreach services," a staff member said.

YouthNetWorks' TLP has six slots for local homeless youth and eight additional beds funded by a new contract with the state's child-protection agency. Serving this foster care population has consumed many of the agency's resources, and as a result, the agency is less likely to take on clients from other referral sources. Despite the difference in funding sources, teens placed by the state and those who enter the program through outreach have the same housing options: they are either housed in a cluster-site setting (the agency maintains four two-bedroom apartments) or in four other apartments in scattered sites. Both system and non-system youth receive the same services and are subject to the same program requirements.

PROGRAM INTAKE

MINIMAL SCREENING, RELIANCE ON SELF-REPORTING

Admission to YouthNetWorks' TLP is fairly easy for qualified teens. Clients in foster care are placed by the state child welfare agency. Non-system youth go through a minimal screening process; applicants must be homeless or at-risk for homelessness and have no children. If they meet these requirements, they are ready to begin the intake process.

Intake begins with a one-hour clinical assessment to screen for mental health issues. Young people with a history of fire-starting, severe persistent mental illness, major mental retardation, recent suicidal history or current ideation, or convictions for sexual or violent assault are automatically refused entry to the program. Unlike in some other programs, current drug and alcohol use does not necessarily disqualify a youth for admission into YouthNetWorks.

Many applicants have incomplete records and YouthNetWorks does not have the resources to conduct thorough background checks on potential clients. As a result, staff must rely on an applicant's self-reporting to assess whether the program can meet their needs. Sometimes, one staff member explained, an applicant will downplay his or her presenting issues, a fact that can cause problems down the road:

We are not equipped for those kinds of youth. We don't have staff 24 hours. We don't have a lockdown area, we don't do restraints. Essentially (the client) could have lots of issues; the problem is that they are able to pull together and present themselves as if they do not.... We are not getting records and that kind of stuff. We are not running a query on the kids and we are not doing drug-testing.... We are just mostly relying on their reporting.

The agency doesn't have the resources to conduct thorough background checks. Staff rely on applicants' self-reporting to assess whether the program can meet their needs. Sometimes an applicant will downplay his or her presenting issues, a fact that can cause problems down the road.

Even with this relatively relaxed intake system, YouthNetWorks does refuse some prospective clients. For example, one staff member remembered, "I did an intake a couple of weeks ago, and he told me he was paranoid-schizophrenic, he was on major medications, and I said 'This is not the program for you.'"

The group-home/scattered-site orientation of the agency can also be a barrier to entry for some youth. Sometimes, female applicants will refuse to be placed in the same building with a male. Agency staff may also decide that an available room is an inappropriate match for an applicant. When a match can be made, the emphasis is to transition the young person into the program as quickly as possible.

According to staff, it is "pretty rare" that young people fail to complete the intake process since "we try to have as few barriers as possible." Some applicants, however, decide not to enter the TLP after learning the program requirements. "There are people (for whom) there are too many rules,"one staffer said.

PROGRAM RESIDENTS
MINORITY YOUTH IN AN OVERWHELMINGLY WHITE AREA

YouthNetWorks' current residents range in age from 16 to 20. While the surrounding community is overwhelmingly white, minorities constitute, on average, approximately half of the TLP's resident population. Currently, the program is serving five white males, three African-American males, three Puerto Rican females, and two white females. While most non-system residents have no social service history, 85 to 90 percent of all the clients in the TLP have been involved with the juvenile justice system.

Many residents are in close contact with immediate family. These relationships vary from individual to individual and the dynamic is often different for system and non-system youth. A staff member explained:

We are in this very rural area. It is very different than in a city. There's not a lot of youth services. So we are mostly talking local kids, so they've got family in the area, and in fact they might have a lot of family in the area…. The (state system) kids, they were separated from their family, so they have a strong pull to that family usually; the family becomes good and the system becomes bad.

When asked how family relationships impact client success, staff responded, "I think it varies a lot on the connection. It is often a mixed bag."

Although all clients receive the same services, program staff clearly differentiate between system and non-system residents. One staff member identified residents with the system backgrounds as the hardest to serve:

The system kids, some of them are furious…. They've been shuttled around; they have zero or very low, low levels of trust, very low levels of developed independent living skills. Oftentimes they have severe trauma histories and have been pretty involved with drugs and alcohol.

YouthNetWorks began serving system youth when a state-funded group home in the area closed and the state needed to find an alternative provider. Because of the quick changeover, many of the residents do not distinguish between the TLP and their former setting, even though there are significant differences between the programs:

They see this as just another place where they are being warehoused. And so it's phenomenally difficult to serve them. This is oftentimes not an appropriate setting, but it's where the state can place them, and often they really need a much higher level of care than we can provide them…. The TLP is reminiscent of the same place (the state group home), but we have fewer rules: there's a setup for disaster.

Although non-system youth are clearly not as hard to serve in the minds of program staff, meeting the needs of these residents is difficult as well. While youth with learning disabilities, drug and alcohol dependency, and trauma history present the greatest challenges, staff were quick to caution that almost all homeless youth are hard to serve. According to staff, up to 80 percent of the youth in the program at any given time could be classified as 'hard-to-serve.' The agency itself is in transition, and struggling to meet client needs:

I think we are trying to do a variety of different things and we don't have a model together that works. There are places we are too loose and there are places where we are too tight. These youth need structure, they need to know what the rules are, not to have too many of them, and need to be able to count on the program doing its piece.

We need to have a program where we are really moving people into a place where there is housing available to them when they graduate, so they have some money set up and they have the skills that they need, and I don't know that we clearly have that. We are lots of things to lots of people. The program has some real strengths, but it doesn't contain kids that are hard-to-serve real well, and there's too many gaps in our services.

Staff described a recent situation where a young Puerto Rican woman placed by the state into the TLP's cluster-site building ended up being ejected:

She got into a beef with somebody else in the house; another girl in the house was having a

thing with a guy in the house…. She got in the middle of it, and she ended up paying someone to go and beat up the guy. She had to leave the program because of that. She needed just a slightly higher level of being able to look down the road.

While instances of failure are more common for hard-to-serve youth like this one, there are also times when the program is able to succeed with these residents:

A young woman, 18 now, comes from a family here that's fairly famous for being troubled. I guess her mom has a long history of prostitution, drug use, is H.I.V. positive, kind of in and out of the justice system and the whole family is a real mess, a lot of violence. She and her sister were both placed in our program. This young woman came into our program and, we've had all kinds of issues with her. She's involved with a boyfriend who is dealing drugs, who is somewhat connected to the apartment that we were placing her in…. At the beginning of her entrance into the program her impulse control was very low, she just wanted to have a fight and beat someone up (when things went wrong).

She matched with a lot of help with her (state) social worker, and through having safe housing that she can count on here…she seems like she is going to graduate high school, she's really pulled it together. (The state) is going to pay for her to go to a fashion institute, she has a driver's license, a car, and she's been able to do what she needs to do to maintain housing. She has not been arrested for anything connected to drugs. I would say that she is someone that is pretty tough to serve, but looks like she is going to make it.

When asked why they thought one person was able to succeed while the other needed to leave the program, staff responded:

One difference is that one person was in scatter-site and the other was in (the cluster-site building). I'm not very sold on the (cluster-site) model…. We're not really running a group home – we don't have the staffing and it's really a campus situation, with all these people having to live next to each other. I think that was part of it.

A difference in support services also played a role:

I think another piece and maybe the biggest piece of it is, the social worker for the one woman who is making it, she's gone to the mat for those kids, she' really involved with them, she's really gone to town. The social worker for the woman who didn't make it, I never heard from her. A big piece was the outside systems support…. I think who we are in trying to run an eight-bed group home is a tough sell, we're not really set up to be in the behavior-control business. What we really need to be doing is moving people to self-sufficiency. That's what this program is ideally set up for and we need to make sure that's what our model is set up for.

Ironically, though YouthNetWorks lamented the gaps in its continuum of services, it was the only one of the four programs highlighted in this report that had set aside funding for a limited aftercare apartment plan. In this program component, youth who have successfully completed a minimum of six months in a clustered- or scattered-site apartment are offered modest financial subsidies that are usually applied toward rent for a non-program apartment, but may also be used for emergencies, clothing, utility bills or other expenses.

PROGRAM SERVICES

LIMITED SERVICES, LIMITED STRUCTURE

According to staff, "A typical day in our program is much like a day of any teenager's life…it is not a highly structured program." Relatively few demands are placed on program residents.

The YouthNetWorks model is two-tiered and progressive. When clients are first admitted into the program, they are given what is called "first-month status." During this time, residents are exposed to a more intensive version of the program. They are subject to more frequent room inspections, are allowed no overnights or overnight guests, have an earlier curfew, and are required to meet twice a week with a youthworker. After the first month, program restrictions are relaxed; youth are allowed more freedom, and have fewer interactions with staff. Residents are expected to participate in weekly life skills programming, youthworker meetings, group home meetings (when applicable) and optional community meals. Program youth are also supposed to spend thirty hours a week either working or furthering their education.

'What we want is incredibly difficult. These youth need to know that you care, that you are connected to them, that you see their strengths, that your going to the mat for them, but at the same time, your going to call tham on their stuff. Caring but containing is what we're aiming for.'

YouthNetWorks offers limited services in the context of the TLP. Staff work one-on-one with residents to do light job training. Such work often consists of interview coaching, work-readiness, and résumé building. Program staff frequently refer youth to local employers who are hiring. The majority of residents find work in the service sector, but are often unsuccessful at holding down jobs for an extended period of time.

The agency also helps residents obtain their driver's license or birth certificate, enroll in driver's education, and secure medical and dental insurance. The program provides all youth with a stipend for food expenses. Program staff organize recreational activities for residents such as swimming, baseball games and camping trips.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

RURAL SETTING BOTH PROTECTS AND STIFLES

For services such as mental health and substance abuse counseling, the program refers clients to other community agencies. While the primary reason for sending clients out for services is the lack of program resources, program staff note that this arrangement allows clients to continue essential counseling even if they are kicked out of the TLP. YouthNetWorks has a good relationship with a popular community literacy program, which, among other things, assists clients in obtaining GEDs.

The existing network of social services in the area is fairly well established, but, according to staff, is driven by the work of a few exceptional individuals, and thus is somewhat fragile. Residents have access to a good but limited public transportation system, and are close to the local community college, which staff describe as "great."

Staff feel that the rural nature of the community has a significant impact on program youth:

It's a totally different dynamic up here, there's fewer resources.... On the other hand there's a lot less trouble to get into here; there's no gangs, it's not a big city and there's not the same dangers that come with a big city. But there's also fewer opportunities.

Living in a predominantly rural, white community presents particular problems for minority TLP residents:

People (in this community) are liberal and try their best, but they don't have a lot of experience dealing with people of color. They have stereotypes in their head, and who do they see? They see a system youth that's presenting a lot of the stereotypes and they can't see past them, and see the other parts of that youth. They see just the potential problems.

Staff also noted that local youth are affected by the area's economic climate and their families' poor educational backgrounds.

A lot of the barriers (to success) are that a lot of these youths' parents didn't go to college. Their parents are sporadically employed and most of the work they did was factory work, which is drying up in the area. So they don't have a model of 'This is what you do: you sacrifice for the long term.'

PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS
HIGH, BUT UNENFORCEABLE

Program requirements at YouthNetWorks are relatively lax. While staff have high expectations for residents, their ability to enforce regulations is limited. As a result, staff relationships with youth form the core of the program. A staff member explained:

Right now consequences are a mish-mash.... The amount that we can do for these youth in terms of consequences is pretty small. Essentially what there is, is 'You can leave.' It's not so much a conse-quence model, it's a relationship model. We have to build a strong enough relationship with the youth that they're willing to do things they don't want to do, because they feel cared for and con-nected to us, because, really, what can we do?

What we want is incredibly difficult. You need to be holding the youth accountable. They need to know that you care, that you are connected to them, that you see their strengths, and that you are going to go to the mat for them, but at the same time you're going to call them on the stuff that they are going to do....Caring but containing would be what we are aiming for.

Consequences do exist for those youth who continually violate program expectations, but the goal is to retain youth in the TLP whenever possible. As one staff member explained, YouthNetWorks' harm-reduction approach to drug and alcohol use is illustrative of the program's overall philosophy:

In a sense, we are not a wet program in that you can continue to use and stay in our program forever. But we are also not a 'test positive and you're gone' program. And we're not sort of structured in a way at this point where if you test positive and then you need to get into a treatment program, if you don't successfully complete it, then you are gone. We try to work with kids where they are, so I would say that we are a 'damp' program.

The basic approach is one of behavior modification with the use of gradual goals to increase strengths and self-sufficiency. This approach can be effective with some of the most difficult youth. One staff member said:

I would actually say that I think that we are doing some of our best work right now with a youth I don't necessarily think is going to make it.... We have this young man, African American, 17, super angry, huge guy. He is everything this society is scared of, and his presentation has adapted because of that and he's been really disruptive and intimidating to staff. Staff have talked to him about being abusive verbally and so what we've really done is over a two-month process. In the first month we scaled everything back and said what we need you to do is not be verbally abusive, and if staff makes a direct request for you to do it, and that's it, and we set a system where he could screw up four times the first week, three times the second week, etc. And no one thought he would be able to do it, and he did. And so this month, (we said to him) now we need you not to be disruptive at meetings, so if you're being disruptive, staff will ask you to stop, if you don't stop, we'll ask you to leave, and he's been able to do that. He's slowly been able to rein in his behavior. I think given the constraints of our program, we are doing a really good job about being clear with him about what he needs to do, so that he can maintain his placement in this program.

PROGRAM STAFF
LOW PAY, HIGH TURNOVER

It is difficult, however, to maintain a relationship-based approach when an agency is constantly dealing with staff turnover. The relatively small size of the YouthNetWorks staff (the program has six full-time and six part-time employees) makes the agency all the more susceptible to the shock waves that ripple through the agency when a staff member leaves. As with many underfunded human service agencies, pay is low and there is little room for career advancement. Entry-level youth workers make $9.50-$11.50 per hour and directors make between $28,000 and $40,000 per year.

Lately, the constant turnover has begun to take a toll:

The program has been in real crisis mode and really reactive and so constantly people are worried things won't get done. The kids act out, and the staff want to call them out or slam them. So there's lots of days I come in, and you get one person after the next calling me saying, 'So and so didn't come in at curfew', or 'So and so had a guest over.' However, we aren't doing the things we are supposed to be doing, helping the kids out, and then we are being overly punitive or overly reactive to them just being teenagers. There is a fair amount of crisis.

The agency is committed to reworking aspects of their TLP; staff say that exposure to best practices at other agencies has helped the program see where and how to improve.

PROGRAM SUCCESS
OUTCOMES ARE GOOD, BUT DECEIVING

During the fiscal year 2002-2003, 100 percent of YouthNetWorks' residents made a safe exit, but that may look better than it sounds for two reasons: one, youth leaving the program had access to a local adult emergency shelter to which they got priority entry; and two, these figures don't take foster youth – the most difficult youth in the program – into account. In any case, staff do not find safe/unsafe indicator particularly useful. Staff said that they used this standard only for their funding reports, and not in their internal discussions or evaluations.

'I would actually say that I think we are doing some of our best work right

now with a youth I don't necessarily think is going to make it.'

When asked to describe an ideal outcome for a resident, a staff member described:

Someone who has graduated to independent housing. Someplace where someone could stay for a minimum of three months…. A GED or high school diploma or some sort of job training so that there's a good setup for having an ongoing source of income, and a couple months' rent. It seems like that would be a good standard of a successful outcome.

YouthNetWorks acknowledged that the program's lack of consistency is a barrier to success for their residents. One staff member concluded:

We are trying to do too many things for too many people and I think that's a big weakness. I think that we have too many rules that we don't enforce, and I think staff have too many competing agendas that they are trying to follow through on. We are not clear enough or consistent with anybody about what we are doing, and that permeates staff and permeates residents. They are struggling and it doesn't help them if we're not clear with them about what we want out of them. But given that, they do OK, that's the amazing thing. These are really adaptable youth, they stay in the system, they are very savvy, but I don't know if the program is helping them be self-sufficient, really. It's helping them be better consumers of the system.

New Horizons
Serving the Whole Youth

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

New Horizons Youth Services, an urban program in northern New England, provides a wide array of services for children and families. These services include a comprehensive program that serves homeless youth ages 16-21 and runaways under age 18. The agency is unusual because it provides everything in one place: food, clothing and emergency shelter, counseling and case management, medical care, access to legal counsel, educational programs, secure employment information about long-term housing options.

Seated within this extensive network of services are two main program components: an emergency shelter and a transitional living program. The goal of the TLP is to provide a structured and supportive community that can help youth develop independent living skills. While the TLP is of primary interest here, this section will include references to New Horizons' other programs since these programs are often utilized by TLP youth.

New Horizons Youth Services began operating its TLP in the early 1990s. The TLP is funded primarily by the federal Family & Youth Services Bureau. New Horizons' other services are supported by approximately thirty local, state, and federal grants, and by private funding. During the course of our interview, New Horizons staff repeatedly emphasized that funding was always an area of concern.

New Horizons' TLP features nine single-room-occupancy apartments. Youth new to the agency stay in the agency's shelter, which accommodates twelve youth. While the shelter is often full, New Horizons staff see no need for additional beds for the TLP. The average length of residence in the program ranges from eight to twelve months, with few youth staying as long as the federally allowed maximum of eighteen months.

PROGRAM INTAKE

DETAILED PLAN STARTS WITH SHELTER STAY

Over 80 percent of the agency's clients find out about New Horizons' services from other young people. The remaining 10-20 percent come from hospitals and the state's justice and child welfare systems. Most youth who come to the agency are simply looking to utilize one of the agency's many drop-in services and may not even be aware of the TLP. A New Horizons staff member explained:

I don't think they come here seeking TLP. They come here seeking basic food and shelter and from there things really begin to unfold for each individual – what they're really after. We organize their programming around where they're at and I think part of the magic that they stumble upon is that there is a longer-term housing opportunity.

This opportunity is attractive to a population that may not have many housing options:

Most of them are survivors of a lot of abuse and their coping skills may not be conducive to keeping a job. There are usually substance-abuse issues to work through in order to get and sustain a job. They usually don't have references, so getting housing in the community is really hard. So a lot of them end up interested in the TLP option because it gives them the opportunity to get subsidized housing.

Youth who express an interest in applying to the TLP first have an orientation meeting with one of the TLP's case-managers. This orientation includes an overview of the program and a discussion of whether the program matches the applicant's needs. After this initial meeting, a team meeting is held with the youth to decide if the TLP programming is compatible with the applicant's needs and goals. Any youth with a conviction for violent or sexual behavior or a history of starting fires is ineligible for the program.

> 'Part of our challenge is supporting a group of young people in our shelter who oftentimes have mental health and substance abuse issues that are well beyond the scope of outpatient support. They come to the shelter for 30-60 days on the TLP track and they don't succeed at the shelter, which means we can't move them to the TLP.'

Before moving to the TLP, applicants must first spend three to eight weeks in the agency's shelter, enough time to give staff and the potential resident a chance to experience each other in the context of a residential program and troubleshoot difficulties if necessary. During this period, clients are subject to a comprehensive intake assessment. This assessment includes questions about the youth's educational background, employment history, physical and mental health history, family background, and drug use. Clients are also asked to identify their strengths, challenges, and goals. Following this initial assessment, clients are referred to any number of the agency's in-house services, including the health clinic, counseling, job training, education, and drug and alcohol clinic.

During their time in the shelter, residents work with a case manager to develop a "commitment plan." This plan details the client's commitment to work on long- and short-term goals, but also lays out the steps that the resident needs to take before moving into the TLP. Each potential resident is expected to be productive at least thirty hours a week. Work, school, volunteering, spiritual develop-ment, and meeting with case managers all count towards the thirty hours. Applicants who don't "come close" to meeting this goal are refused a slot in the program.

Since life in the shelter can be difficult, the goal is to move residents into the TLP as quickly as possible. Staffing issues, however, can cause delays. The TLP program director said:

We don't have a fully staffed residential facility, so we can't move people who are not as fully stabilized as we would like them to be. If we had 24/7 staffing there, we could move young people quicker, shorten their shelter stay, and do a lot of the supporting programming at the (TLP) that now happens at the shelter.

Approximately two-thirds of the applicants to the TLP end up moving into an apartment. It becomes clear from the shelter stay, however, that some applicants are not ready to take the next step towards independent living. "Part of our challenge," one staff member explained, "is supporting a group of young people in our shelter who oftentimes have mental health and substance abuse issues that are well beyond the scope of outpatient support. They come to the shelter for thirty to sixty days on the TLP track and they don't succeed at the shelter, which means we can't move them to the TLP."

Other youth find housing on their own and self-select out of the program. One such youth was described by a case manager this way:

He is a young man with a developmental disability. He got a job and was working hard but didn't save any money. He was working hard in some areas but not in others. The team tried to engage him but he kept missing meetings. He left the program because what he has going is working better for him right now, but it raises red flags for staff. (The young man is living with a middle-aged person for free.) Sometimes forces outside our immediate community and culture are at work. Sometimes we lose people to those forces – whether it's a peer group that's drinking and (saying) 'why would you want to follow those rules at the shelter?' or something that does have (merit). But this young man is not going to make the tracks that he needs to in order to support himself in a healthy life.

PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS
LOOKING BEYOND HOUSING AND JOBS TO 'FIVE CORE AREAS'

New Horizons' ultimate goal is to see clients like the young man described above make multidimensional progress, not simply secure a quasi-permanent place to live. This focus on a wide range of skills and goals is indicative of the holistic approach that marks New Horizons' philosophy. Staff are dedicated to tackling as many problems as possible with the variety of in-house resources available, but also have developed a multifaceted model for personal growth that is designed to equip clients for a full transition to the outside world. One staff member described the approach this way:

I think we're all looking at how can we help young people develop skills to be successful in their goals. That's the premise behind the five core areas. Each of us in this room is hopefully balancing those five core areas in their own lives – it's what healthy people do. And if a core area gets out of kilter, we respond by getting support and managing ourselves – with some help – through that. It's a way for us to develop a formula that helps young people learn that process. And as they move through the TLP and we begin to slough off as service providers, hopefully they're gaining more success in these five core areas so they can go out and succeed without us.

There is an increased emphasis on independence as a client moves through the program. For some residents, the freedom that comes with moving to the TLP from the shelter can be difficult to handle. A case manager explained:

One thing we see at the TLP is that people will be working really hard on their goals to get into the program and they sustain it for a couple of weeks and they're so excited to be there but then the

reality that they can close the door and have alone time becomes real. And many of the young people haven't had that sense of privacy and been able to be alone and be safe and let down their guard, and so they start experiencing the feelings that go along with surviving the emotional and sexual abuse that the vast majority have survived in their lives. And many of them have self-medicated with drugs and alcohol and they're getting used to living a more sober lifestyle – it takes a while to replace the time they spent getting high with leisure activities that are more healthy.... So there's often a backslide that we witness at the TLP where there's a lot of push and pull – 'We want a lot of support but don't structure us too much' – and it plays out in using and self-harming behaviors.

'Sometimes forces outside our immediate community and culture are at work.

Sometimes we lose people to those forces.'

Consistent with an approach that emphasizes process as much as outcome, New Horizons has devised a system of "personal reflections" and "strikes" for clients who do backslide. When a resident gets a strike, he or she is asked to fill out a personal reflection form in order to evaluate the causes for the behavior and preempt future similar behavior. New Horizons tolerates a certain number of strikes depending on what stage of the program a resident is in. Rather than seeing strikes as a failure, agency staff use the strike system as a way to reevaluate an individual's relationship to the program. Clients who are having problems may move back to the shelter for a temporary stay and be given a chance to recommit to the program. Unless they show a marked improvement, they will face a termination of their lease for the TLP program. For agency staff, termination is a last resort. One staff member explained, "We're looking for improvement. If they had been using hard drugs and now they smoke a little weed and drink occasionally, we're not going to kick them out of program unless they're actually using in the house." In the event of certain negative behaviors such as drug or weapon possession or violence, clients can be asked to leave the TLP immediately.

A residential staff member summed up New Horizons' approach:

There is a real structured and well-explained system of consequences and accountability. And then it's also very personal at the same time. We try and build respectful, trusting relationships with all of them so that when we do have to give consequences or make those consequences clear...it's not so much about it being our space and we're in control of it. (It's more about that) we're all kind of working together to keep it a safe place.

PROGRAM RESIDENTS
MORE IMMIGRANTS, WORSE DRUG PROBLEMS

The majority of TLP residents are between 18 and 20 years old; the youngest is currently 17. Most of the TLP residents are Caucasian, which is not surprising given that the county in which the program is located is 95 percent white. Approximately 75 percent of the TLP residents have been in the foster care system and a similar percentage have been involved with the justice system at least once.

The profile of New Horizons' residents has changed over time. Program staff noted an increase in refugees from countries such as Bosnia, Tibet, Sudan and Vietnam. There has also been a significant increase in transgendered youth among the homeless teen population. These youth, one staff noted, are dealing with "additional layers of complexity in terms of day-to-day-challenges." And then there is the local drug culture, which has grown more dangerous in recent years. One staff member said:

Heroin is a big piece. It's hard to believe that (our client) profiles could get any harsher than the profiles that we were dealing with eight years ago, but I think they're younger and the balls that are coming at them are much harder. That presents a challenge to a program like this that has no more staffing, no more resources that go into programming. So we're constantly dealing with how do we adjust to allow young people to be successful.

While many of the residents come from the local area, the program attracts young people from all over the state. "(This city) is so resource-rich in comparison to other parts of the state," a staff member said. "We get referrals from more rural communities and you'll consistently hear them say, 'They've burned every bridge. They need to be elsewhere. They need more.' So oftentimes we're the place that either young people migrate to themselves, or a referral agency will try to make the connection and get them here for services."

Given the changes in the city's teen population and the fact that out-of-town clients tend to be the tougher cases, it is not surprising that New Horizons staff consider the majority of residents in the TLP to be "hard-to-serve." Staff members presented two examples of hard-to-serve youth. The first was of a young man who had managed, against all odds, to successfully complete his stay in the TLP.

'It's hard to believe that our client profiles could get any harsher than the
profiles that we were dealing with eight years ago, but I think they're younger
and the balls that are coming at them are much harder.'

He's dealt with everything we're talking about. He was homeless and experiencing lots of mental health and substance abuse issues. While he was here, he relapsed and did some time at an inpatient program that we referred him to. He then came back to the shelter and then to the (TLP). He was working through his comfort level with his sexual orientation and trying to work through being more insightful about his mental issues. There was lots of work identifying his mental health issues and working through medication options. He was not successful keeping a job. He had self-sabotaging behaviors – sexual promiscuity and stealing from employers. He left the program for a month and moved back into his own apartment. He was using. He then approached us and asked to come back. Once again, he moved back into the shelter and then into the (TLP). Since that time he has been successful in taking meds, going to counseling and meeting his educational goals. He has an apartment lined up and he's moving there this week.

Staff then described a young woman with a similar profile who was unable to successfully complete the program. This woman also had a history of mental health issues and substance abuse. She too suffered a series of relapses in which she would leave the program and then come back via the shelter. Ultimately staff realized that she would be unable to succeed in the TLP.

When asked why this client was unable to successfully navigate her way through the TLP, one staff member commented on the young woman's "masking behaviors." She explained:

That's the tricky part of our work – the youth are all very skilled people who are bright and very capable and they don't have access to that part of their soul because there is so much crap that surrounds that part of who they are. So for her there were a lot of layers of masks and pretend that went on. I think that she was somebody who fooled much of the audience much of the time in terms of her ability to be successful…. I think she was one that we realized that there was something that we weren't grasping and putting her down in the TLP was just going to replicate all that already happened and do her no service.

It is notable that even for the young man who was graduating the program, success was not a linear process; his time at New Horizons was marked by both successes and setbacks. This pattern illustrates the zigzag nature of TLP youths' progress. It is also worth noting that the staff assessments of these two young people stressed not only concrete outcomes such as losing a job or leaving the shelter, but also internal emotional processes such as the tendency toward self-delusion, or the capacity to grow through personal insight. For staff, helping residents see their problems clearly and learn to ask for help is as important as more tangible outcomes such as finding a job or an apartment.

Not all residents are hard to serve, of course. One staff member described a woman who "knew she was going to be homeless, went online and found resources and phoned us. She gobbled up everything we had to offer and used us as a launching pad and sorting through issues." While this woman was an "utter delight," a staff member explained that she was an anomaly, not because there aren't many young people like her who could use help, but because they tend to avoid the services that New Horizons offers.

There's a tricky side for young people who aren't as destitute as the larger portion of who live here. It's a hard environment to be living in a house where people have raging mental health issues and are immature in how they conduct themselves, and aren't able to talk and sort things through. If you're further down the road, sometimes you lose those folks – they don't want to be in that environment…. More often, they don't even come here because we have a stigma.

Thus a program that accepts hard-to-serve youth may have lower rates of client "success" not only because those youth are less likely to complete the program, but also because such programs may have difficulty attracting the easy-to-serve youth – teens without substance abuse or mental health issues who simply need a place to stay .

PROGRAM STAFF

SUPERVISION AND 'COMMUNAL ATMOSPHERE' KEEP TURNOVER LOW

New Horizons employs twenty-four people in its TLP and shelter. This figure includes one program director, six drop-in/residential staff, three case managers, six counselors, three health services coordinators, one legal coordinator, and the staff of New Horizons' jobs program. The staff is approximately 75 percent white – "too white," said one worker – and diverse in sexual orientation.

New Horizons has a very low rate of staff turnover – a fact that staff attribute to the program's communal atmosphere and emphasis on direct communication. "All of the things we expect of our young people we live and breathe as the adults in the program," one staff member said. While pay is lower than staff would like, they said they feel valued by the agency and compensated by benefits such as "health days," birthdays off, and up to four weeks' vacation per year.

Staff members are given regular supervision and feedback on their interaction with residents. One staff member said this is particularly helpful when residents challenge staff:

I think we use each other a lot when the boundaries are challenged – everybody gets regular supervision and that's a good way to sort through: 'This feels peculiar. Help me out.' I think it's pretty apparent what adjustments we need to make. (Often youth) are running a test. They want to see those rules come alive from that piece of paper they just signed. You're a new person in their life. They've taken every other adult down by virtue of this MO, they're gonna let that MO go and it is up to us to juggle those balls, be respectful, be clear, hold them in that place, do it with a smile, sometimes with a little sense of humor if it's appropriate. We spend a lot of time on this topic.

This theme of establishing oneself as both an authority figure and a caring adult was echoed by another staff member:

I think it starts in an appropriate conservative place. Each staff person that meets with a young person has a very distinctive role and function and starts by orienting that young person to who we are and what's expected of them. When a residential counselor is doing an intake in the shelter, he's orienting them to the space and asking them lots of questions while also implanting how he's gonna help them feel safe and secure and supported and how he's gonna hold them accountable and how he's gonna respond when they do cross over and make a mistake. And so I think it's not something that's in a package and presented, it's about each of us modeling and keeping ourselves in check every moment we're around young people. For each of us, that spells something different.

PROGRAM SERVICES
EXTENSIVE ON-SITE RESOURCES

New Horizons is unusual among the programs in this report in that it is able to offer most of its services on site. The agency has its own job training program, health clinic and on-site counseling for residents. Counselors are cross-trained in substance abuse work and New Horizons contracts with a psychiatrist who treats residents and prescribes medication.

New Horizons also provides support for an array of educational options. The program will negotiate with the local school system so that a young person can do coursework at New Horizons and finish high school there. It also maintains close contact with the local high school in order to assist program youth who attend public school. This contact is particularly important because the school is sometimes reluctant to pay for the extensive testing that some program youth need – especially if they are new to the school district. In such cases, New Horizons reminds the school of its legal obligations to homeless youth under federal law. The agency also helps residents obtain a GED if they cannot or do not want to go back to school.

Since encouraging healthy options for fun/free time is one of the program's focal points, New Horizons offers an array of recreational activities. The agency encourages its clients to express themselves creatively and offers instruction in poetry, photography and other creative pursuits. Staff also take youth off-campus on snowboarding and hiking trips.

THE COMMUNITY
THE FOCUS IS ON 'NOT DOING IT ALONE'

Even with New Horizons' extensive on-site services, the program is continually looking to establish relationships in the community. "We're always asking how do we not take any issue on alone," a staff member explained. "A big part of our job is partnering with other resources." To that end, the agency has been able to forge several creative collaborations. For instance, while New Horizons runs the TLP, a local land trust actually owns the building, and the city's housing authority administers Section-8 vouchers for it.

In general, program staff think highly of public services and employment opportunities in the community. New Horizons youth generally don't have much trouble finding entry-level jobs; many program residents end up working for a local phone surveyor, a soap factory, a manual labor temp agency or in the service sector.

Local buses runs to most of the areas where residents work or attend school, and the TLP provides bus vouchers to residents. The bus does not run after 10 PM or at all on Sundays, which limits access to some jobs. Still, staff noted, city transportation is excellent compared to transportation in other parts of the state. A local community college is only a short walk away.

The staff's biggest complaint about their city is the lack of affordable housing. With entry-level wages, most young people are simply unable to afford a place to live locally. Staff also say that substance-abuse counseling outside of the agency is in short supply.

PROGRAM SUCCESS
TRUE MEASUREMENT REMAINS ELUSIVE

By statistical standards, New Horizons' TLP is not particularly successful. During the fiscal year 2002-2003, about three-quarter of New Horizons youth made a safe exit; on this measure, New Horizons ranks near the bottom of federally funded TLPs. About 40 percent of young people completed the program; on this measure, the agency ranks in the middle.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that staff interviewed for this report were unimpressed by the validity of RHYMIS statistics. One staff member said bluntly, "We have a lot of issues with RHYMIS. The boxes that they ask staff to check off are not the boxes that young people are living in or choosing from." Another staff member added, "(They) don't ask us how many are amazing musicians or poets." New Horizons staff do not use the RHYMIS categories in internal discussions about their program. Instead, staff members view successful outcomes in terms of individual development. One staff member explained:

If someone graduates the program, that's definitely not the only success. It's hard to gauge all the stuff in between. Some of it is the skills they pick up along the way; some of it is just the self worth and recognizing that there may be something different than what they've been accustomed to.

Another staff member said the program sees success when:

Young folks are honoring themselves and making safe choices and conducting life to survive, whatever that means to them.... If they have a higher level of self-insight so they can face their challenges and a higher knowledge base of resources in the community or the community they're going to in order to get their needs met. If they have a lesser level of self-destructive coping skills and a higher level of coping skills. If they're showing signs of self-esteem and self-expression.

Another staff member noted that for some young people, it makes little sense to focus on outcomes like housing or employment. "For some of them, it's not committing suicide," she said. "It's not overdosing. It's being clean for three months."

In general, the New Horizons staff members were reluctant to characterize a young person's stay in the TLP as unsuccessful based on specific outcomes. One staff member explained:

Even if someone doesn't move out of the shelter into the TLP or if they don't move out of the TLP in a planned way, for so many of them, they're still making healthy supportive relationships with adults for the first time, they're still taking time out for an important inventory of where they are in terms of their holistic health and are able to access new resources.... They often continue to access these resources and continue these relationships even if they're not meeting expectations.

Sometimes, as one staffer noted, the skills that a young person learned at New Horizons are not immediately apparent, but eventually will be.

I'm thinking of a couple of young people that I still see around town – they left the program and bumped along and couch-surfed and went back to some of the old ways, but they were able to identify what wasn't working for them and they had the skills and knew how to get out of that situation. And now they are employed and partnered and living life the way anyone else would. I think a lot of times they leave and do a little dip – they're free from the structure – before they realize this is not about us, this is about how to live life and do what they need to.

New Horizons staff recognized that this incremental, developmental approach is difficult to measure. "Tracking outcomes is a deficit in this program," a staff member admitted. "We have really good ideas but we're a little challenged to capture that information."

Staff listed factors external to the program as the biggest obstacles to their residents achieving positive outcomes. Some of the factors are in the residents' personal histories, and frequently involve sexual abuse. Others factors are societal, and have to do with the attitudes of other groups in the community:

This is a disenfranchised group. The best example is meeting with our local law enforcement and saying we've just started new outreach, and the law enforcement people wanting us to clean up those foul-mouthed, cigarette-smoking, low-lifes that hang out by the bus stop – if you can do that, that's success from their point-of-view.... So just that whole perspective on adolescence, that (these youth) shouldn't even be seen and definitely not heard.

Staff also felt that constraints on resources created weaknesses in the program that affected the residents. While those weaknesses did not place any resident in real jeopardy, one staff member quickly responded when asked what the program would do with more funding:

We would staff our TLP 24/7. We would create apartment opportunities when they left the group setting that they would be able to move into the next supported living situation. I think there are gaps in our continuum that hurt them and hurt us in terms of what we are able to provide.

Ocean House
Breaking the Rules When No One Else Will

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Columbus Avenue in this congested suburb in southern New England is a lively commercial street. The occasional shabby storefront is surrounded by well-maintained businesses, and for every home that needs a coat of paint a restaurant has just been renovated. Sandwiched tightly between two narrow shops is the Ocean House transitional living program for homeless teens.

Inside, the hallways are painted bubble-gum pink, sea foam green and faded yellow. Long, bright florescent tubes overpower the light from the windows, which are small and awkwardly placed above eye level. But the institutional feeling quickly evaporates when the program staff open their doors. They are friendly to visitors and to each other, and despite the chaos of ringing phones and traffic noise from below, they create a welcoming environment.

Ocean House, which opened in 2003, is a sister program to another program for homeless adolescents located in the same space. That program, funded by the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, provides shelter for homeless youth as they attempt to find housing, finish school, get jobs and accomplish other personal goals. Ocean House may have a different name, but it is the same in every other respect. The two programs are staffed by the same people and they attract the same kinds of youth. The only difference is that on the HUD-funded side, residents are required to pay 30 percent of whatever they earn towards rent. Otherwise, as staff pointed out, the programs have the "same principles, same criteria, same goals, same policies."

All fifteen program spots – the six new slots and nine original slots – are generally filled. Ocean House allows youth to stay for up to eighteen months, while youth in the older program are given two years to make the transition to permanent housing. In the past, few youth have stayed that long. One staff member noted:

We've had people who have moved out after their two years because we have had to terminate with them. But sometimes we get people who aren't ready for the program, who can't follow the rules, who stay for like two months. So it is unpredictable, but most don't stay for the whole eighteen months.

PROGRAM INTAKE

'WE TAKE ALMOST EVERYONE'

The staff members said most referrals to Ocean House come from other homeless shelters in the area (they named two local adult shelters and one large program for youth), and from schools and other programs within the TLP's managing agency. Former residents also recommend the program to their friends and acquaintances.

Once a potential resident makes contact with the program, staff require an "official verification of homelessness" form, which needs to be signed by the referring agency. A staff member described the rest of the process:

We ask them to come in and have a first interview, during which they do an intake assessment, which they fill out. Based on that, we decide whether or not this person would be a good fit for our program. And, if they are, we ask them to come back for a second interview and to bring three references. We usually give them a packet with information about the program, the rules of the house, the expectations, so that we can be sure that they have that information so that they can decide if this is something that they really want to do.

There are certain conditions under which an applicant will not be admitted. A potential participant might be refused admission if he or she has serious mental health or substance abuse problems. A clinical social worker screens for these issues at intake. A staff member also noted:

'Our youth are not considered priority one for housing assistance. Housing officials consider as priority one people who have been displaced by a natural disaster. Just being homeless isn't good enough.'

We'd be very hesitant if someone had a history of suicide attempts, because of past experience with kids coming in and trying something. So we are very guarded right now about safety. We don't manage their medications. They have to be independent enough in certain ways so that they can manage themselves.

In addition to specific assessments of mental health issues, the staff also attempt to screen out potentially violent or sexually inappropriate participants. One staff remembered:

Some time ago, we had a young man come in who really seemed homeless. He had lost all of his teeth and stuff. When we started to talk, he started to describe himself as a loner, and then he said 'Well, I have this big dagger, about this big, would it be alright if I brought it?' And I was like 'Well…' And he was like, 'I could leave it outside.' So I said, 'I don't think so.' He said, 'I have a fascination with knives.' Red flags started going off in my head and I thought that he is just not the right kind of person for this program.

Another staff member added:

We require very little in terms of what they (the residents) have to do. We have a mandatory substance abuse group, life skills, and case management, nonnegotiable, but it is only three hours out of the week, so most kids are okay with it. And he was like, 'Are you kidding me? There is no way I am going to do that.' He was a very oppositional young man. He would not have done well here.

Despite the program's inability to serve youth with violent or sexually deviant histories, or who are currently struggling with severe mental health or drug problems, the program does not actually

turn many people away. One staff admitted that the program "takes almost everyone. It has to be something that makes them completely inappropriate." These extreme cases are the exception rather than the rule, and the program considers itself well-equipped to deal with most problems that the youth in their program face.

PROGRAM RESIDENTS
TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH HISTORIES ARE COMMON

Most residents are dealing with some mental health issue. Many are depressed, suffer from bipolar disorder or have a history of trauma or abuse. Almost all of the residents have some substance use or abuse issues, and a high percentage have been involved with the child welfare system or the criminal justice system. Only about half of the residents have any regular contact with a family member, staff members were mixed about whether having a family contact was good for youth. One staff member said, "I don't know, because a lot of the time, the relationships are so dysfunctional. The cases that I have seen, it doesn't usually help."

Because so many clients have the same mix of problems, it can be difficult to predict who will succeed in the program and who will not.

We had a recent person who was schizophrenic. So in my head, I am thinking 'Is he right for the program?' And he was very persistent, he was an amazing advocate for himself. He kept calling, he kept pushing, and he went out and got himself a job and got into school. He did amazing things in order to get here. So in the end I said, 'Let's give him a chance.' And he has been one of the most successful.

PROGRAM AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Ocean House provides youth with connections to youth job training and placement programs, and finds that, although many of the youth do low-skilled and low-wage work, they are, for the most part, successful at keeping their jobs.

Ocean House also offers counseling, which is mandatory for new residents and optional for program veterans. "Counseling is mandated from the first time they enter the program because it seems to be something that when the participants come in, we don't know what has been going on in the past," explained a staff member. "So we just try to have that as an outlet to try to figure them out and once the therapist or counselor comes and says that 'Hey, this person is pretty cool and probably doesn't need to see me any more,' then we stop. But it is always open."

For youth dealing with more serious mental health problems, the TLP has a psychologist who visits the site and does therapy with residents in need. They can also be referred outside of the program for services. The program has a relationship with other agency programs, as well as a contract with a local counseling agency.

Ocean House has a similar approach to substance abuse problems. All youth in the program are

required to attend the substance abuse group. In addition, the program has relationships with substance abuse counselors who can treat participants with more serious problems.

Ocean House staff members are unimpressed by the local school system. They do, however, maintain a good relationship with school officials so that they can advocate on behalf of program residents. They also help residents get into GED programs or register for classes at technical schools, community colleges or universities.

Another vital program area is housing assistance. One staff member observed: "Housing is a big part. You have to establish a relationship with all of the housing authorities in the area, because we apply for housing for every single one of the kids. That is one of the first things that we do." Even with the help, the housing market in the area is notoriously tight and Ocean House youth often have difficulty getting housing assistance. One staff member explained:

They (program residents) are not considered priority one. They consider as priority one people who have been displaced by a natural disaster. Just being homeless isn't good enough. Usually the letters that we get say six months to a year. Which would be cool if that is the case, because six months is not that long to wait, but it usually takes longer.

PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS
'WE REQUIRE VERY LITTLE'

Ocean House requires that youth be actively involved in some kind of productive activity for at least twenty hours a week. Most of the residents fill their twenty-hour requirement by going to school, working on a GED, finding or working at a job, or doing volunteer work. In addition to their twenty hours, they are also required to attend three hours of meetings – the life-skills group, a sub-stance-abuse group and an hour of case management – each week.

Despite the structure the program offers, some residents have a hard time meeting the twenty-hour productivity rule. As one staff explained, the consequences for not fulfilling this requirement are case-specific:

Sometimes the kids say, 'Well, I just don't want to do this.' So instead of just hitting them with a consequence, I ask them why not go and try to find an alternative. I see that they might just be afraid to go out in the community on their own. So I might go out with them the first couple of times and say 'Look, this is how we do it, this is what you are supposed to say, this is how you are supposed to present yourself.' Then hopefully it will give them the little bit of confidence to go out there and do it themselves. And if it becomes something where they just don't want to do it, we would put them on a behavioral contract, something that they can abide by and something we think is lenient enough to do.

In addition to spending twenty hours a week at some productive endeavor, residents must adhere to a number of other rules. There is a ten o'clock curfew that can only be excused if a resident is working. No alcohol or drugs are allowed. There may be no physical or sexual contact between residents. There is zero tolerance for violent behavior. There are chore days with jobs for everybody. Finally, all residents have to be out of the house every morning by nine o'clock.

Violations of the drug policy are also dealt with on a case-by-case basis. One staff member stated:

I don't want to say that it is kick-out status. What we do is have them see somebody intensively, and have them go to the drug abuse group.... One of the things that we have been doing, in terms of really trying to have the participants stop or cut down, is to have the urine tests done. Then, if a kid is, say, using marijuana, the usage will show a really high rate, and we will tell them that the next time it should look like it is going down. And if it then goes up, we know that the person isn't taking us seriously, thinks that we are joking, or has a more severe problem then we thought. We would then decide what to do with that person.

Through these techniques, staff members are able to reach most youth and help them achieve the goals of the program. There are some exceptions, however. "If we hit every single thing that we can possibly do for this person – if we have tried A, B, C and D, and nothing works – they may be asked to leave the program." A staff member described the last time that happened.

We had a female who was here for six months. She had a young daughter in the foster care system who had been there for some time. We told her, coming in, that part of the program is that you do education, and some type of community service, and she was like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I can do all of that.' But she didn't really listen. We set up a few things and they didn't happen. So we put the ball in her court and were like, 'What can you do?' and it didn't happen. So we started to really push her into doing something and the harder we pushed her, the more she found ways not to do it. We gave her counseling, behavioral contracts, we talked to her extensively to see what was going on, we even thought about getting her evaluated, because maybe she needed to be medicated. But things still weren't happening, and progressively it just got worse and worse. We pull all of the people together, outside resources, too, and come up with a solution, and if that solution doesn't work or fit, then we will just have to let them go.

PROGRAM STAFF

COMPETITIVE PAY AND SUPPORT FROM COLLEAGUES

Dealing with the magnitude of the youths' problems and helping youth navigate different service systems is a difficult job. Thus staff members say they feel particularly lucky to have skilled and committed coworkers. In addition to the program director, there are three case managers, an assistant director, four overnight staff and an intern. Staff say they are paid well compared to workers in other social service agencies. The competitive pay, combined with the supportive working environment, have kept turnover at a manageable rate; many of the staff have been working at the program for several years.

Because of the low turnover, staff are able to develop long-term connections with residents who had not previously had a stable presence in their lives. Said one staffer:

I feel like I have good days when I can spend one-on-one time with a participant and feel like I have really connected. I like to think that I can get into what is going on with them. And I have definitely had times when we can go for a walk, or go for a coffee and I can really talk to them. Whether

that (connection) is short-term or long-term is debatable, but you can always leave that night knowing that you've done something that will help them get where they want to get. And it doesn't always have to be clinical. You don't always have to feel like you have gotten to them emotionally. It can be just as exciting if you helped them apply for a job that they got or if the housing comes through. All of these things help the participants get on the right track.

Sometimes a staff member's ability to connect with a resident can get that young person through a crisis. One staff recalled a young women with a history of drug abuse:

For a while she would check in and go straight to her room. One day I went to check on her, because she had looked pale and her eyes were glossy-looking, and I asked her what was going on. Shortly after, her parents arrived and told me that she was high and that she had taken their car and they wanted it back because she was always screwing things up for them. So the parents were really making matters worse. So, I was able to get the parents out of the house, talk to the person and then get on the phone to find her a place to go for the night. She had recently used, and we weren't sure how much she had used or what she had used so we wanted to find her a safe place to go. The next day, when she came back to the program, she was like, 'Thank you, because I was scared and I relapsed and everyone was kind of pointing fingers at me and you kind of was cool and comfortable and got me the help that I needed.' So there are definitely situations that seem bad but can really be the way to start a person towards success.

PROGRAM SUCCESS

ARE THEY BETTER OFF THAN WHEN THEY CAME?

Since Ocean House has received federal funding as a TLP for such a short time, there is no RHYMIS data available for the program. But staff say that success looks different for each client. For some young people, success might mean making a meaningful connection with an adult for the first time. For others, it might mean getting or keeping a job, continuing or finishing school, or feeling good about volunteering. Success can mean coping with a mental illness or reducing drug and alcohol use. In other words, staff members say that if a client has taken steps toward a healthier life, then the program has done its job.

Is that always the ultimate test? No, staff acknowledge. The concept of success is slippery. To prove it, they described two young men who looked successful when they left the program, but probably would not be successful for long.

It is not the way that we would like to see it happen. They chose to move out, and they are much better off then when they came here. They are both in college, they have jobs, are making money. But they went back home into dysfunctional relationships, and that is a little worrisome.

There are also more extreme cases in which youth have to leave the program without having achieved any of their goals at all. One staff member said, "Sometimes it is to the point where we have to call the police, which is very painful because we have worked really hard and then at the end they break all of the rules and we have to decide that they can't stay here anymore."

The biggest obstacle that residents face in achieving their goals are a lack of resources. There is a

real need for "more job training programs and vocational training. There has to be more housing. And we need to have employers who want to have relationships with these kids and provide them with successful opportunities."

According to one staff member, the wider system is too rigid to really help homeless youth:

We break every possible rule to help these kids out.... But other places don't do that, larger systems don't consider how a policy will affect a young person. For example, we have a no-drinking and no using drugs rule. We have a young man who has been doing really well. But we found alcohol and other stuff in his room and instead of just saying, 'You have to leave,' we worked with him. We got him in treatment and we came up with a plan for how he could redeem himself. Other systems, other agencies, would write him off because of a policy created for everyone. But you have to treat each resident as an individual or else you aren't really serving anyone.

Analysis
Factors influencing program outcomes

From the case studies presented here, it is evident that while transitional living programs for youth tend to offer the same mix of services, they do not share a universal philosophy or model of implementation. Each program described in this report has its own structure, service emphasis and resource base. A variety of factors, many of them outside of the agencies' control, affect the type of youth who are served, how services are provided and how much progress youth in the program ultimately make toward the goal of self-sufficiency.

The **pool of youth served** is one of the most important variables influencing TLP outcomes. One TLP in this study described itself as being a high-barrier program, meaning that the program intentionally creates requirements that are so stringent that only the most determined applicants will agree to them. This program is opposed to doing a lot of "handholding" and instead pushes youth very hard to do things for themselves – maintain jobs, finish their education, develop independent living skills. The program emphasizes employment as the method by which youth learn independence, and as a result, insists that youth maintain a steady job throughout their time in the program.

Other TLPs – New Horizons is one – see themselves as low-barrier programs, accepting most youth who apply. The decision about putting up low versus high barriers is generally a function of the needs of the youth in the community, the number of youth on the program waiting list and strings attached to any state funding the program may receive. The willingness of a program to work with extremely difficult or troubled youth – either because the program views it as its mission or because it simply needs to fill empty slots – may pull down its success statistics, both because such youth have serious problems and because other, easier-to-serve youth may be put off by associating (and being associated with) such residents.

Agency philosophy is another key factor in program success. Almost all TLPs focus on housing and employment, but some stress other, less tangible factors as well, such as spiritual development or health and well-being. When an agency measures indicators for which no official yardstick exists, many small successes are bound to go unrecognized except by the program and the young people themselves.

The **existence of services on-site and within the local community** is vital for connecting young people with the help and resources they need. New Horizons' "one-stop shop" allows youth to take advantage of health and mental health services, job training, education and other resources all in one location. The ability to provide services in such a way saves the program the considerable trouble of having to utilize a scattershot service system within the larger community. Residents in the YouthNetWorks or YouthAscent programs, on the other hand, must go into the larger community in order to access these services, and may have a more difficult time getting appointments and paying for them. The upside, as one program noted, is that youth forced to navigate services outside the agency will be better prepared to cope if they get kicked out of the program, or when they otherwise exit. This is a not insignificant benefit; a relatively high percentage of TLP youth have such serious mental or cognitive problems that they will continue to need social services into adulthood, regardless of how hard the TLP tries to prepare them for self-sufficiency.

For just this reason, the **quantity and quality of services in the larger community** are important. Each program can utilize its local public school system, but the response of the schools can either help or hinder their chances of finishing school or attaining their GED. Additionally, if youth wish to take college courses or go into a trade, the proximity of a community college or state university will affect their ability to get a degree and ultimately land a good job with living wages. A quality mental health system can provide the intensity of counseling that might not be possible in-house. Whether the community can offer such resources is dependent on state and city funding and state regulations governing the transition of adolescents to adult systems of care. The economic climate each program is located within obviously has an impact on chances for self-sufficiency. Employment opportunities and affordable housing vary by community, and all any agency can do is creatively collaborate with willing businesses and programs to create the best situation it can for its clients.

Each program differs in its **physical structure**. Some sites have on-site housing for youth, while others have apartments scattered within the city. Some provide a clustered-site or group home environment; others work with youth in individual apartment settings. There are positive and negative factors associated with each of these housing options. The experience of living alone for the first time might actually be difficult for youth who have never had private space and have no idea how to spend free time alone. In contrast, clustered housing can pose a problem because agencies may not be able to hire on-site staff to monitor residents round the clock.

Referral sources can profoundly influence program outcomes. The programs highlighted in this report indicated that they receive some referrals from former residents, but that most referrals come from schools, hospitals and other social service organizations. Many of the programs are one piece of a web of services provided by an overarching agency, so they also receive referrals from their own colleagues. Programs with a good "street presence" will get referrals from its outreach workers, while others receive youth from state child welfare systems. Staff in all four agencies said that "system" youth are extremely difficult to serve because of learned attitudes of dependence and entitlement. As we have seen, the presence of very difficult youth can tend to discourage more functional youth from even applying to a program.

Finally, the youth themselves impact TLP success. Youth who enter TLPs go through an **intake process** that is unique to each program and is meant to screen out unmotivated or seriously troubled youth. Programs like YouthAscent that have numerous requirements for entering the program (youth must have a job before being admitted, for instance) lose youth up front who cannot or are not willing to meet those standards. In contrast, a low-barrier program may end up serving youth whose problems are more acute and who know that they can wash out of the program and continually come back. If those youth are from state systems, the issue is even more complicated. For example, the YouthNetWorks program is required to take any foster youth referred by the state, which means that a high percentage of the program's clients may be comparatively uninterested in abiding by program rules.

The prevalence of hard-to-serve youth (however defined by each program) must inevitably play a major role in any discussion of program success. Programs with higher numbers of hard-to-serve youth will likely see lower success rates; programs with a more rigorous intake process will likely have fewer hard-to-serve residents and thus experience higher success rates.

DEFINING SUCCESS
A QUESTION OF NUANCE AND TECHNICAL CHALLENGE

Each TLP program has its own working definition of youth success. Those definitions generally include evaluation on multiple facets of progress, including housing status, educational attainment, employment status, independent living skills development, reduction of drug/alcohol use, and personal growth. Programs almost always consider where the youth started, how much effort and progress he or she made in the program, and the youth's immediate and longer-term prospects for stability and self-sufficiency. As we have seen, youth who look good upon exiting a TLP may be destined for trouble in the near future, and while staff can often predict problems, they cannot do much to help youth avoid them.

TLPs also incorporate the youth's own goals and needs when determining success. If the residents have specific ideas about what they want to achieve, then attaining those goals, as modest as they may seem, must be at least one important benchmark of success.

Finally, point-in-time data-collection does not allow for measurement of longer-term outcomes for youth who participate in TLPs. While it is obviously important to know where youth go immediately after exit, it would also be useful to know where they are two months, six months, and a year afterward. Understanding what happens to youth in the weeks and months after leaving a program could help program staff develop or revise aftercare services, or improve aspects of the program that former clients report were unhelpful. Collecting such follow-up data is obviously a challenge, but developing a means to do it is important and necessary.

Recommendations

Collect intake data to better understand programs' populations. Since some TLPs accept only relatively high-functioning adolescents while others accept almost all youth, comparing programs' safe exit rates may not tell us much about how well programs function. Creating detailed client profiles at intake would allow for a greater understanding of TLP clients' baseline problems and thus accurately measure how far any individual client actually progressed in the program. Such client profiles would require the development of scales measuring the presence and severity of mental health problems, literacy levels, risk for violence and other factors that are not systematically or adequately measured now, and thus are not reflected sufficiently in RHYMIS data.

Collect longitudinal data. For the most part, little is known about what happens to program participants after they leave a program, although some programs may keep informal tabs on former residents. Efforts underway to systematically collect data after exit should continue, with new thinking about creating incentives for youth to cooperate. Some programs, for instance, have been able to achieve high rates of follow-up by offering small financial rewards for youth to call at prearranged intervals, for instance on their birthdays. These systems tend to reduce the likelihood of collecting information primarily from youth who have the best outcomes (those who have addresses and phone numbers) and those who have the worst outcomes (who may be dead or in jail).

Develop a method of capturing the more subtle achievements of TLP youth. Indicators of success currently in use fail to capture the incremental achievements of program residents. Scales measuring a variety of factors – mental health, literacy, PTSD, system/non-system history, "chaos quotient," risk of violence, degree of conflict with staff and peers, degree of substance abuse history and risk – should be developed and used to measure individual progress at predetermined points in a TLP stay. Such a system would yield information that is considerably more nuanced than current data, and that also paints a truer picture of TLP youths' level of dysfunction and movement toward change.

Increase funding for new methods of evaluation and data collection in two areas. First, a system should be created to generate highly detailed data from a carefully selected pool of programs across the country that reflect differences in geographical setting, demographics, economic opportunity and so on. Examining a representative sample of TLPs would obviate the need to attempt an in-depth evaluation of all TLPs, which for a variety of reasons is unfeasible. But apart from the federal government's interest in understanding TLP outcomes, programs themselves have an obvious and urgent need to implement in-house evaluations in order to improve their services and allocate resources effectively. Agency-level evaluation must, among other things, assess how a variety of services and programs within a multi-service agency interact with one another and with the local and regional community. These issues affect the success of programs, but cannot be evaluated or compared at the national level. To help agencies develop evaluation systems that can be truly useful in improving services, we recommend that FYSB require programs to spend a certain small percentage of their grants – perhaps 1 to 2 percent – on developing new and substantially better ways of collecting and using data. Such a requirement would strengthen obligations concerning evaluation that FYSB grantees already undertake when they accept federal funding, and would do more than perhaps anything else to force advances in evaluation.