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Jon Bradley is a leader in the service continuum for homeless youth and adults in Maine and is spearheading Maine's first statewide Homeless Youth Count. Jon is the primary architect of the Portland Partnership for Homeless Youth, and testifies before legislative committees, authors position papers, and offers trainings throughout the state. He has served as co-chair of the Portland Continuum of Care for more than 10 years, chairs the Homeless Youth Provider Group, and is a member of the Statewide Homeless Council. He has taught social policy and advanced research at the University of Southern Maine and served on statewide task forces on homelessness, mental health housing strategies, and youth issues. At Preble Street, he developed Preble Street Teen Services to provide a skilled and holistic response to runaway and homeless youth, as well as Maine's only "housing first" permanent supportive housing program for chronically homeless adults.

Jon received his doctorate in Social Work from Columbia University and has worked for more than 30 years with high-risk adolescents and homeless populations, concentrating on innovative programs targeting youth on the streets in New York City and Maine. He has supervised substance abuse, counseling, outreach, legal, and crisis/runaway services, working with health, education, and evaluation resources on service integration and quality of care, and has developed and implemented intervention strategies targeting suicide risk and HIV risk among runaway and homeless youth. He has published award-winning work connecting the theoretical concerns of the research community with homeless youth programs and has done training and consulting on group and intervention techniques, risk prevention, holistic services, and program development for institutions such as Columbia University School of Public Health, New York State Psychiatric HIV Center, Hetrick-Martin, and New York State Department of Social Services.

Introduction

For 25 years, Preble Street has led the effort to end homelessness in Portland, Maine. Originally focused on adults experiencing homelessness, Preble Street has expanded its efforts to end homelessness among youth. Starting with a teen drop-in center, Preble Street eventually added emergency shelter, transitional housing, anti-trafficking services, and employment supports. In 2015, Preble Street led a statewide YouthCount! Initiative to obtain a more accurate enumeration of youth experiencing homelessness in Maine.

This brief summarizes Preble Street's efforts to implement a more comprehensive data- and research-driven approach to ending youth homelessness in Maine, shares some lessons learned from this work, and provides suggestions for where Federal support could be helpful in further developing a local coordinated response to youth homelessness.

Preble Street: Background

Founded in 1975, Preble Street is committed to providing accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing homelessness, housing instability, hunger, and poverty, and to advocate for solutions to those problems. Starting as a social work placement agency, Preble Street has expanded to meet the needs of vulnerable populations locally and statewide, adding new projects in order to continue to fill unmet needs.

By the 1990s, Preble Street had developed a low-barrier adult day shelter, meeting basic needs, providing case management and outreach, and bringing together community resources, including health, mental health, and employment services, into a single site to support youth experiencing homelessness. The agency's current programs include the first program in Maine to implement a Housing First approach; community case management that provides scattered-site housing in partnership with three local housing authorities; a statewide SSVF program; Homeless Voices for Justice (advocacy by and for adults who have experienced homelessness); and the Maine Hunger Initiative, leading efforts to reduce hunger statewide.

Services and Housing for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

In 1996, Preble Street took its first foray into responding to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness by opening a teen drop-in center. The drop-in center provides:

- Access to a resource center that serves hundreds of youth who are struggling with substance use and mental health disorders, trauma, and institutional histories, and those who are disconnected from family and/or guardians;
- Meals, clothing, showers, crisis intervention, and activities that promote leadership development; and
- A low-barrier, harm-reduction approach to services and housing, which successfully ensures that youth maintain treatment and support over time, and ultimately increase housing stability.

Based on local research,¹ and the recognition that youth needed a greater array of interventions and services, Preble Street has since begun developing a comprehensive Teen Services Division that offers a continuum of services and housing for Portland’s youth experiencing homelessness. Its Teen Services Division now includes the following programs:

- An overnight shelter for youth under 20 years old where 24-hour services are provided year-round;
- A foundation-funded, low-barrier transitional living program that implements a transition-in-place model for youth experiencing chronic homelessness by providing access to available Shelter Plus Care vouchers when needed;
- An Anti-Trafficking Coalition funded by the Department of Justice Office of Victims of Crime, which served 67 individuals in its first year; and
- A Learn to Earn Program that offers stipends for placement in a job after completing a specialized curriculum.

Maine’s YouthCount! Initiative

Two primary factors provided the impetus for Preble Street to lead a youth count in Maine in 2015: 1) the migration of youth to the urban center from across the state; and 2) the desire by all youth homelessness service providers to achieve an accurate enumeration of youth experiencing homelessness. The Butler Family Fund provided a small grant to support a count of youth experiencing homelessness, which resulted in a survey of unaccompanied youth in seven of 16 counties in the state. The goal was to better understand the number, distribution, and needs of youth in various parts of the state. Counties surveyed spanned both rural areas and urban centers and represented both counties with the highest rates of poverty and coastal counties that have extreme disparity in income distribution. Conducted over a two-week period, the count focused on a single night as the point in time. The Homeless Youth Provider Group—which includes shelter, transitional housing programs, state-funded outreach, and representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services—supported the effort. To perform the count, Preble Street worked with a lead organization in each county, supported local providers, added staff as requested, and engaged a researcher and a consultant to assist with the strategy, survey, and analysis.

- **Homelessness among youth in rural communities**—In rural areas, most of the youth located were found either through schools or by using youth as partners to locate others. Most youth in these areas were couch surfing, although a small number of older youth were camping, in cars, or in other unsafe locations. Although the data is preliminary, in the five counties that do not have an urban center and an RHYA-funded shelter, 155 unaccompanied youth were found, of whom 80 were couch-surfing, 35 met HUD criteria, and 20 were in other situations, such as transitional, treatment, or criminal justice settings.
- **Homelessness in urban centers**—Youth in urban centers are more disconnected from informal and formal supports, have fewer protective factors, and experience homelessness for longer periods of time, with many meeting criteria for experiencing chronic homelessness. Additionally, there are high rates of mental health and substance use disorders and trauma

¹ A three-year study (McLaughlin Report, 2008) that followed 232 youth intakes at the Teen Center found that youth who experienced homelessness for less than 6 months became more quickly and successfully engaged, and that a low-barrier, harm-reduction approach was more successful in ensuring that youth could maintain treatment and support over time, and ultimately increase housing stability.

among the youth who survive on the street, combined with the added risk of exploitation and trafficking. Challenging cultural and linguistic issues (within immigrant populations) are also present in urban centers. Preble Street Teen Center has a large group of asylum seekers, ranging from 16 through 20 years old. While providers need to coordinate to create a cohesive system, law enforcement, housing providers, landlords, and employers are also critical to helping homeless youth achieve stability.

Lessons Learned

From its work to implement a more comprehensive response to youth homelessness, Preble Street has identified several lessons and challenges that may be relevant for other communities' efforts to end youth homelessness:

- 1) Relationships and intensive supports are fundamental to the success of youth experiencing homelessness who have experienced multiple traumas and a loss of hope.
- 2) Coordinated on-site services lead to increased outreach efforts by all providers, decreased barriers, and a shared philosophy that increases engagement in needed services and improves outcomes.
- 3) Standardized screening is critical, but it must be youth-focused and it requires strategies specifically designed for rural areas.
- 4) Support for evidence-informed programming with strong evaluation must span Federal, state, and local systems and requires integrated and flexible funding.
- 5) Harm reduction and low barriers to entry across systems requires adjusting rules and increasing focus on understanding behaviors that are the result of trauma, isolation from supports, and often multiple rejections and failures.
- 6) Sustaining leadership and recognizing the distinct needs of youth and the programs equipped to serve them helps Preble Street maintain influence with the state and in Continuums of Care.
- 7) A focus on early prevention and intervention with youth and families may prevent migration to services in urban centers that may result in decreased protective factors, increased risk factors, and costlier interventions.
- 8) Schools, law enforcement, faith communities, and service providers, among other local resources, can help with prevention and early intervention work if they are educated and engaged.
- 9) Schools (teachers, counselors and liaisons) can play an important role in identifying runaway and homeless youth; however, the role of McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons within school districts needs more clarity, monitoring, and resources.

Integration of service planning and access to services like mental health, substance use, health, domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, legal, and child welfare is critical for this population.

Opportunities for Increased Federal Partnership

There are several ways that Federal agencies can support community-level efforts to pursue programmatic innovation and to create a more comprehensive response to youth homelessness. These include:

- 1) Support funding opportunities for harm-reduction and low-barrier service models in order to create opportunities to engage youth.
- 2) Recognize the value of continuing funding for high performers and issuing renewals based on performance measures in order to improve stability and enhance continuity and innovations. For states like Maine, with limited resources and no required statewide planning, providers are forced to compete for RHYA funding, and there is no expectation of, or opportunity for, continuity.

Planning occurs only when we decide together to forgo a funding opportunity in order to avoid taking from one of our partners.

- 3) Use the CoC process to require some statewide or CoC planning around youth services and RHYA applications to improve collaboration.
- 4) Support new approaches and models in public systems, as well as evaluation that seeks more clarity on the value of innovative approaches to serving youth experiencing homelessness.
- 5) Align age categories for determining eligibility for HUD and RHYA programs, which would allow for more flexibility in service provision.
- 6) Decrease administrative barriers for Federal funding sources like RHYA and HUD Continuum of Care.
- 7) Ensure that standardized screening and assessment processes are youth appropriate and equipped to deal with the unique nature of rural communities.
- 8) Ensure greater engagement from schools in the identification of runaway and homeless youth.