Opinion: Housing Is Harm Reduction for Homeless Youth

It’s a lot easier to fight addiction when you have a stable place to live.

September 23, 2019 By Casey Halter

When it comes to overcoming homelessness, young people can face major barriers, including long waiting lists and sobriety restrictions. A recent article on the advocacy website Youth Today asks, “What would happen if we just gave youth experiencing homelessness housing?” No qualifying criteria, stigma or preconditions applied.

Authors Lyndon Hernandez and Jamie Powlovich argue that for homeless youth, housing is one of the best methods of harm reduction. Central to their point is the evidence-based Housing First approach, which prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness as the best way to help them combat such issues as mental health and substance use disorder.

The Housing First model was developed by Pathways to Housing founder Sam Tsemberis in 1992 and has since been adopted and guaranteed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

So “Why are so many youth still homeless?” ask Hernandez and Powlovich. For one thing, nearly half of all homeless youth identified in a national research study have spent time in juvenile detention, jail or prison. What’s more, the majority of youth experiencing homelessness are youth of color, and a large percentage of them identify as LGBTQ. Homeless youth also face different systemic barriers than other homeless populations and often receive less support than other groups.

As Hernandez and Powlovich write: “We cannot consider a young person ‘housed’ after we give them a voucher when the reality is that due to rising housing costs and gentrification, it is unlikely they will ever find a landlord who will rent to them.” The continue, “When developing housing policies, we cannot base our thresholds on the most high-functioning youth.”

The article also demands that housing providers move away from punitive approaches that deny young people housing or kick them out of current programs for breaking rules around sex work, drug use or spotty school attendance. In fact, housing advocates have long argued that these policies are not only discriminatory and ineffective—they also put youth at greater risk for violence, incarceration, substance abuse and illnesses such as HIV and hepatitis C virus

(HCV)—potentially rendering it even harder for them to find housing in the future.

The article urges nonprofits, community providers and policy makers to support and expand systems and programs that address youth homelessness via the Housing First approach. They also encourage decision makers to listen to young people about which programs work best for them.

To read the full op-ed visit youthtoday.org/2019/09/housing-as-harm-reduction.

To learn more about Youth Today and their work in addressing homelessness, substance use, incarceration and other issues facing young people today, visit youthtoday.org.

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