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Teen Youth and the Need for Secure Housing

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Author Note

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Abstract

The Epicenter provides services to at-risk and service involved youth ages 16-24 in Monterey County to ensure they are able to flourish. In the United States many youth are impacted by insecurity and homelessness, and that is the case in Monterey County with thousands of youth experience homelessness each year. While The Epicenter provides supportive services to young people with housing needs, there is limited information available regarding young people's housing trajectories and needs. For this project I aimed to learn more about the housing needs and experiences of the clients of the Epicenter. I found that many of the youth struggled with housing due to lack of affordability. I recommend that The Epicenter apply for funding to provide direct financial assistance to youth and build relationships with local landlords in order to support youth to secure and maintain affordable housing.

Keywords: youth homelessness; LGBTQIA youth; foster youth; housing services

Agency & Communities Served

All youth in Monterey have access to a safe space at The Epicenter of Monterey County. “The Epicenter exists to empower at-risk and a system involved youth ages 16-24 to flourish by connecting them to community resources that provide opportunities for equity and hope in order to improve youth outcomes in Monterey County” (Larruari, 2023 a, para 1). The Epicenter is a youth-led and youth run organization that provides connections to resources that include housing, education, employment, mental/ physical health and wellness.

In Monterey County the Epicenter services the 25% of youth under 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The Epicenter provides the community it serves with access to onsite services and also referrals to partner organizations. Partner organizations include the Monterey County Workforce Development Board and Monterey County Behavioral Health. Monterey County Workforce Development Board “integrates private and public partners to help youth (ages 18-24) build skills to improve employment outcomes, attain certifications through vocational training, and assist in applying for school” (Larruari, 2023 b, para. 8). The Monterey County Behavioral Health provides outpatient services for children, adolescents, and adults who are experiencing psychiatric or substance abuse problems. The Epicenter provides housing services to youth, such as helping clients evaluate budgets, explore rental options, apply for housing and to ensure youth achieve better outcomes regarding housing insecurities (Larruari, 2023 a).

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

The Epicenter is one of many local organizations around the country attempting to address the social problem of youth homelessness. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the leading national voice on the issue of homelessness, each year, over half a million unaccompanied youth (under age 24) are homeless for over one week (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Locally, The Monterey County Office of Education's Homeless Children and Youth Services Program which serves all Monterey County's 24 school districts, provides the most up-to-date account of youth homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which is the most commonly cited definition of youth homeless defines homeless youth as:

individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals; children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and migratory children who qualify as homeless (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d., para 2).

Using that definition of homelessness, The Monterey County Office of Education's Homeless Children and Youth Services Program reported in "2020-2021 that of 77,923 students enrolled in school 9,974 qualified as homeless, 8,658 were doubled up, 176 lived in hotels, 449 sheltered

and 507 were unsheltered” (Monterey County Office of Education, 2021, p 1). This data demonstrates that homelessness for youth is a large problem in Monterey County.

There is a prevalence of youth homelessness that includes LGBTQIA+ community. According to research, persons who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Questioning) are overrepresented in the homeless youth population (Dechants et al., 2021). LGBTQIA+ youth face homelessness disproportionately to their straight and cisgender classmates since up to 28% of the youth who are homeless identify as LGBTQIA+, compared to 7-9% of the population identifying as LGBTQIA (DeChants et al., 2021). When comparing to non-LGBTQIA+ communities, LGBTQIA are more prone to experience, depression and suicide, and this is particularly true for LGBTQIA youth experiencing homelessness, with these youth being twice as likely to have attempted suicide in the past year (Dechants et al., 2021; Kovalick, 2021, para 1). While the problem of youth homeless is complex the following model (Figure 1) provides an overview of the problem. More details on the contributing factors and the consequences are in the following sections.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
System involved youth	Foster youth are experiencing housing insecurity in Monterey County	High rates of drug use
Unable to afford housing		Lack of educational support
Incompatible housing		Homelessness

Contributing Factors

System Involved Youth

One of the factors that greatly affects a young person's prospects of dealing with housing insecurities is being system involved. According to the National Alliance to End Youth Homelessness, young people who have been involved are more likely to become homeless (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). The largest longitudinal study on foster youth California found that former foster youth experience homelessness at higher rates than the general population and that this may be caused due to the abrupt end of supportive services when the youth become adults (Courtney et al., 2020). Another study of foster youth which was data collected via convenience sample from 184 homeless former foster youth provides further evidence that many youth experience homelessness after spending time in the system (Yoshioka-Maxwell, 2021, para. 17). This data proves that since the Epicenter serves homeless youth they are undoubtedly serving youth impacted by foster care. In any given year, 3.5 million young adults are estimated to be homeless, with about one third claiming prior foster care experience and half reporting engagement with juvenile detention, jail, or prison (Narendorf et al., 2020, para 1).

Unable to Afford Housing

When a foster youth ages out of the foster care system, they may face several challenges regarding employment and housing. There are many factors associated with the foster care system that may affect the probability that a youth will be able to find employment. Mental health struggles including PTSD are a large factor in regards to employment. Many foster children have experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment, and poor treatment both before and after entering the child welfare system. According to research, foster children frequently go through a number of stressful experiences that could lead to a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder. Youth who have aged out of the child welfare system are particularly troubled by the continued

effects of interpersonal violence (Barboza & Valentine, 2022, para 2).

The factors of having PTSD may create greater risk of involvement in the justice system. When a youth in the justice system is involved they do not pass background checks. Youth involved in the justice system normally have no prior work experience. With low income and low level of work experience, foster youth face hardships finding affordable housing. The majority of young people become employed and/or enroll in postsecondary education as they transition into adulthood. It is estimated that one in nine young people are neither working nor enrolled in school. Young people with foster care backgrounds are particularly prone to becoming detached from school and work as they enter adulthood (Geiger, & Okpych, 2022, para 2). By age 21, a third of former foster adolescents are neither employed nor enrolled in school, which is a percentage that is much higher than that of their general population peers of the same age (Geiger, & Okpych, 2022, para 2). The reality is many foster youth aging out are more likely to have struggles related to employment, juvenile system involvement and mental health struggles compared to non foster youth.

Incompatible Housing

Foster youth have specific backgrounds that make particular housing environments incompatible. Similarly, LGBTQIA youth have specific housing needs. Both populations are likely to have prior mental health struggles, prior experiences with homelessness, and prior experiences with the justice system that can make finding housing challenging. Ways to help these youth facing housing insecurity would be additional resources and youth-related services that focus on housing.

Using data from the most comprehensive sources on the topic, the National Youth in Transition Database and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, social work scholars and Cambell found that youth who age out of foster care are at a greater risk of having negative outcomes in various areas. According to the study which included data from over 4,000 youth across the county, staying in foster care, receiving ongoing academic help, and receiving financial aid services between the ages of 17 and 19 shielded foster adolescents from going without a place to live. Foster adolescents who stayed in foster care and continued to receive financial aid services from years 17 to 19 were spared from being locked up from ages 19 to 21 (Huang & Campbell, 2022, para 1-2). There are many factors that make it difficult to match foster youth with housing or roommates. Most of these young people experience inadequate support and struggle with the transition to maturity, according to research on young people's opinions and experiences. The results of the survey confirm the resourcefulness and desire for autonomy of foster adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood as well as possible areas where services could be improved to better support these youth, especially during times of transition (Ruff & Harrison, 2020, para 1).

Consequences

Higher Rates of Drug Use

Many youth once they do not have support – especially after stressful housing environments, lack of support, and negative influence – may turn to drug use. Foster youth and LGBTQIA youth facing housing insecurities will be more likely to use drugs at higher rates than youth that have stable housing. Nationwide, the Literature shows that one-third of youth and adults experiencing homelessness report illicit drug use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration, 2020). “Young people seeking assistance from youth alcohol and other drug services require support to help them minimize the harms from their substance use and continue to develop healthy and meaningful lives” (Hallam et al., 2022, para 1) which included housing support.

Lack of Educational Support

Youth with lack of support will be less likely to complete education goals. The lack of financial support, education guidance and secure housing will affect the productivity of a foster youth and LGBTQIA youth. With motivations to enroll in school, there is a higher drop rate due to not having access to resources. Children who have previously been in foster care make up a large portion of the homeless population, which also has high rates of mental health issues. A study found that for foster adolescents, relationships with kind non-parental adults are crucial because they promote good behavior and attendance at school. Youths' relationships with family members and teachers should be given top priority by families, schools, and foster care systems in order to promote their educational experiences (Lamb et al., 2022, para 1). Additional support for youth education promotes better housing outcomes and sustainability.

Homelessness

Without housing youth will face violence, dangerous living conditions and unstable lifestyles. It will be insufficient and difficult for homeless youth to attend school, continue employment and consistent mental health under harsh conditions. According to research, “foster adolescents struggle to adjust to adulthood in a variety of areas, and the move to independent life may be particularly difficult for them” (Berzin et al., 2011, para 1). A study found that former foster youth risk becoming homeless:

Compared to their peers, youth who leave the foster care system without permanency experience greater risks for adverse young adult outcomes, including homelessness, incarceration, substance abuse, and early child birth (Prince et al., 2019, p. 33).

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Proposal

Young people who access services at the Epicenter often struggle to secure housing that is appropriate for their needs financially, emotionally and socially. While the Epicenter provides supportive services to young people with housing needs there is limited information available regarding young people's housing trajectories and needs. This information would allow the Epicenter to provide better targeted supportive housing services to young people.

For this project I planned to learn more about the housing needs and experiences of the clients of the Epicenter which includes foster youth and/or LGBTQIA youth between the ages of 14 and 24 Monterey County. In order to gather this information, I will survey young people that receive services from our center and host a listening session. The survey will ask youth questions regarding their housing needs, their current housing situations and their experiences securing housing. During this listening session, I planned to ask young people to discuss and share what barriers they have experienced securing housing, what support they have received to secure housing and what additional services the Epicenter could offer to help young people secure housing. Results of this listening session and survey will be used to create a memo for staff at the Epicenter to use in order to create better supportive services for youth. The memo will detail the efforts of the listening session to collect information that will better service foster youth and LGBTQAI youth facing housing insecurity. The memo will help future staff prepare and understand tools that help assist youth from youth. In addition, I will create an online housing

tool for young people that attempts to address the needs they identify during the listening session and interviews. I will address the need for appropriate housing by using social media platforms to help connect foster youth with other former foster youth and allies.

Project Justification & Benefits

The primary purpose of the survey questions will be to collect information regarding housing, education, employment and wellness for youth in Monterey County. I expect to create a resource for the Epicenter that will help the Epicenter meet the needs of the youth of Monterey County. The outreach will be in the form of social media posts and flyers. This will ensure that youth gain access to resources and opportunities that relate to housing disparities and support in Monterey County. The problem addressed in this project is lack of secure housing and support for youth in Monterey County. The benefit of the project is to develop and demonstrate that youth community needs are being evaluated and data representation helps youth access opportunities. The project will focus on collecting information that will help the Epicenter address homelessness. The memo and the online tool will address the contributing factors of affordable housing and incompatible housing by offering recommendations for appropriate housing.

Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes

There will be an attendance record to help track who will attend the listening session. Youth that cancel, may still participate in the survey.

One measurable expected outcome of the project was that approximately ten youth fill out the survey. I predicted that an average of 80% will come to the listening session in person. I

anticipated that ten people will show up and 7% percent will gain additional information that will support their housing needs. I expected to get information that will support my project hypothesis that youth need specific support that they are not currently receiving. I will include the new information in my memo. I will also gather information that will help me create a social media platform to support foster youth with housing insecurities.

The project meets the best practice of a set of agreements for a listening session. The listening session will start with establishing the group agreements. The agreements include terms and rules that everyone agrees on before the focus group begins. These agreements establish confidentiality and respect for others. These agreements also create a safe space for youth to discuss their personal information. Also the group agreements offer anyone the opportunity to get support if needed during any discussion.

Implementation Process

For my capstone project, I conducted a listening session that will focus on housing insecurity. The content of the project was questions and conversations that are meant to give a voice to youth. The listening session included a survey that will be distributed to youth. The survey asked questions that gathered information for a memo that I created to help The Epicenter staff better serve youth with housing insecurities. With the help of The Epicenter, youth gathered, filled out surveys, and then spoke in a listening session. I identified factors and information to help address the issue of housing insecurity for youth in Monterey County. (See detailed plan in Appendix A.)

Project Results

The intended outcome of my project was to build knowledge of housing needs and experiences of the clients of the Epicenter, which includes foster youth and/or LGBTQIA youth between the ages of 14 and 24 in Monterey County. Prior to the project, I had no information regarding the housing experiences or needs of my clients, which made it challenging to build targeted resources that could be utilized when youth had immediate housing needs.

In terms of measures of success of my project, the first measure was the number of youth I was able to collect information from. The second measure of success was the breadth and depth of housing experience data collected. The third measure of success was whether staff at the Epicenter find the information collected useful for their work. To gather evidence regarding the number of youth I was able to collect information from, I took attendance at my session. To gather evidence regarding the depth and breadth of information collected, I analyzed the data based on the type of participants reached (LGBTQIA youth, foster youth, etc.) and the robustness of data collected. (Did youth participate in the listening session and survey? Did youth answer all multiple-choice questions? Did youth answer all short answer questions?) To gather evidence regarding the usefulness of information for the organization, I asked my supervisor to assess the usefulness of the information provided in my memo.

In order to complete the intended outcome of my project, I conducted a listening session and survey of clients at the Epicenter. In total, 15 young people attended the listening session, and 14 young people completed the survey. In terms of demographics of youth surveyed, 64% of the clients surveyed were between the ages of 15 and 17, and the remainder were between the ages of 18 and 23. Of the 11 clients who chose to share their sexual orientation, 45% identified

as bisexual, 27% as heterosexual or straight, and the remainder identified as unsure or pansexual. Twenty-one percent of young people identified as being impacted by foster care.

In terms of findings, I discovered that many of my clients had histories of housing instability. For example, 29% of survey respondents reported having experienced homelessness, and 29% reported having couch surfed. Additionally 35% of the clients surveyed had previously had to leave their housing because it was unsafe.

In addition, to past histories of housing instability, many of my clients reported currently being in precarious or less-than-ideal housing situations. For example, one youth described their current housing “okay not in great condition, it is old and very cramped”. Only 21% of clients surveyed stated that their current housing was stable. Additionally, only 14% of surveyed clients described their current housing as very affordable or affordable. This sense of instability was also reflected in clients’ feelings about their future housing options, with only 21% of clients surveyed feeling very confident that they will have safe affordable housing options in the future. In terms of future housing goals during the listening session, youth expressed the desires of buying their own homes, having stable housing they could share with their family, and having housing in safe, friendly communities. When discussing the housing resources they needed, youth expressed needing financial assistance for rent and utilities, help to locate stable, affordable and safe spacious housing, and emergency support navigating resources if they become homeless.

My project was a success regarding the first measure of success, which was the number of youth I was able to collect information from through my listening session and survey. My initial goal was to reach ten youth. I surpassed that goal significantly. In terms of my second measure of success, the breadth and depth of housing experience data collected, my results were

mixed. Ninety-two percent of young people who attended the listening session also chose to take the survey. My findings would be deeper if all youth had participated. One youth did not participate because the survey was optional. In the future, I would not make it mandatory because youth deserve choices. All but one youth who took the survey answered all the questions, which did increase the depth of the findings. The youth that did not complete all the questions completed all the multiple choice. In the future, I may limit the number of short answer questions or provide individuals the chance to audio record their answers to short answer questions since this youth may not have been comfortable writing. In terms of my third measure of success, my supervisor reviewed the memo and approved it. My supervisor did attend the listening session and remarked that they learned a lot through listening to the youth. This provides evidence that staff at the Epicenter will find this information helpful for their work.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, based on the results of my listening session and survey, lack of affordable housing is one of the major factors contributing to housing insecurity for clients receiving services from The Epicenter. In addition, involvement with the foster care system, to a lesser extent seems to impact the youth the Epicenter serves. Based on these findings, I have three recommendations for The Epicenter. First, attempt to secure funding or partner with organizations capable of providing direct financial support to youth in need of housing. Second, connect with and collaborate with local landlords to create a pipeline for youth to get preferential access to affordable housing. Third, create a partnership with the local child welfare agency office to ensure youth aging out are aware of The Epicenter services.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Task	Timeline	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables
Attend planning meeting	By Jan 25, 2023	Mentor, Student, Agency Volunteers	Meeting agenda	Meeting minutes, Task assignments
Meet with foster youth Liaison	January 1st - March 1st (weekly)	Mentor, students, Staff	Epicenter board room, laptop	Agenda, budget creation
Outreach planning	December 1- March 1st	Deputy Director, Mentor & Foster youth liaison	Laptop	Youth involvement estimated
Youth involvement planning	Feb1- March 10	Foster youth liaison and youth staff	Laptop	Listening session plan
Decide on listening season content	Feb 1-March 1	Mentor and foster youth liaison	Laptop, power point , google doc	Content created for listening session
Survey brainstorm	Feb 1-March 1	Foster youth liaison	laptop	Created 3 options/layout
Survey creation	Jan 1-March 1	Foster youth liaison	laptop	Survey prepared and google form created
Create budget for listening session	Feb 1-March 1	Foster youth liaison	Google doc, laptop	Provide to mentor complete budget

Youth involvement /compensation planning	Jan 1-March 1	deputy director, mentor	Google doc, laptop	Planned budget
Get budget approved for listening session	Feb 15-March 5	Deputy director, Mentor	Office space	Budget approved, funds provided, gift card purchase
Estimated listening session	March 22	Foster youth and mentor	Board room	Survey provided; meeting completed
Distribute survey	March 22	Foster youth	Google forms	Complete surveys
Reviews and analyze survey	March 30	Foster youth liaison, youth staff	Laptop, google forms	Input data
Complete Memo and provide findings to center	April 7	Self	laptop	Memo approved
Memo Review	April 8	Executive Director and Self	Laptop	Memo was found to be valuable and informative