

*Experience living independently while still in care can play a key role in developing self-sufficiency skills for foster youth. Can a comprehensive housing program in Ohio be replicated in other communities?*

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## The role of housing in the transition process of youth and young adults: A twenty-year perspective

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IN 1981, LIGHTHOUSE YOUTH SERVICES, a private nonprofit agency in Cincinnati, Ohio, began one of the first independent living programs for adolescents in the state. The local county children's services supervisors and Lighthouse administrators had been hearing numerous stories of youth who had left the county's foster and group homes and were discharged from county custody, only to return several months later stating that they were homeless. The youth were reporting that they had learned a lot from various placements, but their families remained dysfunctional and were still unable to provide a stable place for them to live.

Lighthouse started a small pilot project for youth from the agency's boys' group home who were seventeen years old and unable to return to live with their families: they would be moved to individual apartments, while remaining in county custody. These

apartments were rented from private landlords and could be located in any part of the community. The agency furnished the apartments with used furniture and supplies, gave each youth a small weekly allowance for food and transportation, and assigned a group home social worker to check on the youth and call him regularly.

Many in the county thought this was an unwise venture, fraught with liability issues, adolescent chaos, and regular news of negative events. This chapter describes the agency's experiences, twenty years and thousands of youth later. I joined Lighthouse in 1982 and became director of the independent living program (ILP) in 1986, inheriting a box of files, a porch full of old couches, and about ten youth in various states of immaturity. Today the program averages around sixty-five youth and fifteen of their children a day and has served as a model program for communities around the United States. Over fourteen hundred youth have come through the program. The ILP coined a phrase early on, "independent living without housing is like driver's training without a car." The agency learned that unless youth get experience living on their own, even the best life skills training programs will not have a full impact. (Exhibit 3.1 provides definitions of independent living arrangements.)

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### *Program description*

The ILP accepts youth ages sixteen to nineteen, male and female, as well as pregnant or parenting teens, in county or state custody. These youth were temporarily or permanently removed from their biological or adoptive families due to chronic abuse or neglect and usually could not return to live with their families. Most youth are discharged from the program before reaching age nineteen. Most participants are placed in individual apartments intentionally because we believe this is the best way to help them develop survival skills in a short period of time. We accept that this will be an experience full of risk and mistakes. Youth are usually not ready for this experience.

Clients can be placed anywhere in the county where they are near a bus line. We look for places a youth can afford when they

### **Exhibit 3.1. Definitions of common independent living arrangement options**

*Institutions:* A large structured facility or group of facility housing anywhere from forty to several hundred youth, with most services provided on-grounds.

*Residential treatment centers:* A facility or group of facilities usually serving between fifteen and forty youth and using a combination of on-grounds and community-based services.

*Community-based group home:* A house in the community of six to twelve youth that uses existing community services but provides some treatment by around-the-clock trained staff.

*Supervised apartments:* A cluster or complex of apartments occupied by a group of youth preparing for independent living, usually with a staff person living in one of the units or using a unit as an office. Twenty-four-hour coverage is often provided.

*Specialized family foster homes:* A youth is placed with a community family licensed to provide care and sometimes specifically trained to provide independent living services.

*Shelters:* A facility that provides short-term emergency housing to teens in crisis.

*Live-in roommates:* A youth shares an apartment with an adult or student who serves as a mentor or role model. The apartment can be rented or owned by the adult or the agency.

*Host homes:* A youth rents a room in a family or single adult's home, sharing basic facilities and agreeing to basic rules while being largely responsible for his or her own life.

*Boarding home:* A facility that provides individual rooms for youth or young adults, often with shared facilities and minimal supervisory expectations.

*Shared house:* A minimally supervised house shared by several young adults who take full responsibility for the house and personal affairs.

*Semisupervised apartments:* A privately owned apartment rented by an agency or youth in which a youth functions independently with financial support, training, and some monitoring. Also known as scattered-site apartments.

*Single-room occupancy:* A room for rent, often near a city center.

*Specialized group homes:* Sometimes also referred to as semi-independent living programs, these homes are usually staffed as a group home but house older teens and focus on developing self-sufficiency skills.

*Subsidized housing:* Government-supported low-income housing.

are out of the system. We try to place youth in areas with which they are familiar. Clients can keep their apartments, furniture, supplies, and security deposits if they are employed at termination and have proven to the landlord that they are responsible. Clients who do not have a stable source of income at termination are assisted in finding other living arrangements, often through some type of low-income, subsidized housing organization.

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### *Services offered*

This section looks at elements of a comprehensive transition process.

#### *Housing*

The ILP rents apartments from private landlords in the county in neighborhoods that are affordable and close to the client's school, job, and social supports. The program also operates two shared homes, one for males and one for females, that have four beds and a live-in resident manager and two supervised apartments with a resident manager occupying one of the apartment units. The program pays the security deposit and provides necessary furnishings, other supplies, and a telephone. If the client does well and has a job at termination, he or she can keep the apartment and all of the furnishings and take over the lease.

#### *Financial support*

The ILP provides a weekly allowance of fifty-five dollars, ten dollars of which is saved in an agency aftercare account for the young person. The forty-five dollars is to cover food, laundry, and personal items. The agency also covers utility, telephone, and rent payments until the last few months in the program, when the client takes over paying bills if possible. The ILP assists clients with work clothing, minor school fees, and miscellaneous expenses. Most clients are expected to work a part-time job and purchase any items beyond basic necessities.

### *Life skills training*

The ILP has created a twelve-project life skills curriculum that the youth completes at his or her own pace. The agency has developed the curriculum over the past ten years, gathering useful materials from around the nation and adding information that program participants appear to need. The topics are an assessment of current level of functioning, money management, time management and planning ahead, use of community resources, apartment management, nutrition and food preparation, use of public transportation, social skills, employment skills and finding and holding a job, problem solving and decision making, self-care, and building a support network.

### *Emotional support and guidance*

Each youth is assigned to a social worker with a caseload of eight to twelve youth. Other program staff members assist with client problems as they arise. Clients are usually contacted several times each week, including regular telephone contact, and vulnerable or new clients are asked to call in daily. The program staff members maintain pagers, voice mail, and an on-call system. Clients should be able to reach a staff member within five to fifteen minutes at any time.

### *Case management*

ILP staff members connect clients with educational, vocational, therapeutic, medical, dental, and other needed resources. Everyone works toward the goal of maximum potential client self-sufficiency given the time available and the developmental capabilities of the youth.

### *Crisis management*

The ILP staff provide twenty-four-hour crisis management, which can involve hospital runs, resolving client-tenant problems, apartment maintenance issues, or confronting client friends or family who are causing problems at the apartment, among others. This time-consuming activity is an expected part of the process of learning responsible behavior.

### ***Outreach***

The ILP staff conduct self-sufficiency and independent living training throughout the year for eligible clients. The program has created numerous workbooks and training materials specifically designed for local youth. The program is also involved in a year-round training program designed to teach foster parents, group home youth workers, and other care providers how to teach self-sufficiency skills to youth in their early teens.

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### ***Measuring Program Success***

The ILP is community based (often keeping the youth in her or his original neighborhood) and strength based, recognizing the resiliency of the youth and his or her previous history of overcoming obstacles. The program believes that teens, like most other people, learn only when they have to and learn best by doing. The program also believes that teens coming from extremely dysfunctional families need intensive attention and support to counteract years of abuse, neglect, and distorted thought processes.

Youth in the ILP exit the system in a fully furnished apartment or subsidized housing situation. The outcomes the program strives to achieve are driven by the basic survival needs of the youth. The ability of the youth to function without ongoing dependence on the adult system is the ultimate measure of the program's success. The final analysis of success is determined by the youth and referring agency and must take into consideration the youth's developmental potential, the behavior of the youth prior to placement in the ILP, and the time the program has had to work with the client.

Here is a case example that demonstrates how the county system typically works to transition youth to life on their own. Regina (named changed due to confidentiality) is a seventeen-year-old youth who ran away from home at age sixteen after years of being sexually abused by her stepfather. The county placed her in a Lighthouse group home for four months and then referred her to

its independent living program. While at the group home, Regina completed a thirteen-part self-sufficiency program offered by the county and Lighthouse. She lives in an apartment three blocks from her school and works part time at a department store. She meets weekly with her program social worker at her apartment to review her progress. Regina does her own shopping, cooking, and cleaning and manages her transportation needs. Her social worker is helping her learn to budget her money so that when she is discharged from the system three months after she graduates, she will be able to keep her apartment and all her furnishings and take over all of her own bills. With full-time work, she has a chance of being able to afford her apartment for some time.

The program has worked closely with the county juvenile court and children services personnel to develop policies and procedures that work for the youth, program, services system, and the community. The program currently averages a daily population of over sixty-five youth a day and their children. Many former clients return to train younger teens or speak to care providers about what helped them become self-sufficient.

A unique feature of the Lighthouse ILP is its ability to move youth along a continuum of living arrangement options depending on their behavior and level of functioning. Youth who are evicted from an apartment might spend a week in the agency's crisis shelter before receiving a second chance in another apartment. They might live for a while at a boarding home in downtown Cincinnati before moving into an apartment or at one of the program's shared homes. The program rarely terminates a client, knowing that mistakes are powerful learning opportunities.

Youth with developmental disabilities might spend several months in the program's supervised shared home before moving into their own apartments. They can be returned to a group home or foster home and contract to work their way back into their own apartment if their original behaviors prove that they were not ready for the freedom.

The Lighthouse ILP is now a permanent part of the county's continuum of care. The county recognizes that some youth do not have families or relatives willing or able to provide enough long-term

stable emotional or financial support. It actively seeks feedback from members of the community on how it can improve services.

The program has basic rules and policies to guide all youth, but there is a lot of flexibility in expectations depending on the overall situation. Clients need permission to have overnight visitors and are allowed no more than two visitors at a time. No one is allowed in a youth's apartment when the youth is not there, and alcohol or drug use is not tolerated. The program does its best to give clients chances to learn from mistakes but will terminate them for involvement in illegal activities or continuous rules infractions.

The program has these desired outcomes:

- Experience in living independently. Youth currently stay an average of ten and a half months.
- Knowledge of budgeting and money management issues, learned from experience.
- Knowledge of basic life skills information.
- Increased sense of personal responsibility.
- Connections to caring adults.
- A vision of a possible positive future. Youth are given not only information to help them see their future but also a possible place to stay.
- Connections to adult community resources.
- Time to grow up and opportunities to “fail safely.”
- Affordable housing at discharge.
- A chance to keep all furnishings.
- No need to move again at discharge.
- A chance to adjust to a neighborhood.

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### *Case Examples*

The following case examples show how Lighthouse developed living arrangement options that provide different levels of supervision, geographical flexibility, and second chances for youth who cannot handle their first chance on their own. It takes a system to



make this work; child welfare, juvenile court, and most often non-profit care providers need to see the importance of giving youth a chance to get experience before discharge for this to work. The child welfare system's primary goal of protecting children and youth is challenged as the new goal, a process of supportive letting go, takes precedence.

Trevor, age seventeen, is a chronic runaway who cannot live with other peers. He ran from two group homes and three foster homes but always kept his job at a surfing supplies store in his town. His school attendance was sporadic, but he showed a lot of potential. He was referred to an ILP, which placed him in an apartment rented from a private landlord. He did well on his own for several months, but soon complaints came from the landlord about parties, heavy metal music at 2:00 A.M., and lots of people coming and going. After several warnings, the ILP staff came to his apartment, helped him bag up his possessions, and took him to a house run by the ILP with three beds for males and a live-in resident manager. Trevor was not happy but agreed that he had lost control of his apartment. He stayed at the shared home for three months and earned his way back to another scattered-site apartment.

Cathy, age seventeen, lived in a foster home with four other foster siblings in a small town thirty miles from the city. She was doing well in all areas of her life, but her caseworker knew she could not move back with her family and needed to learn to live on her own. A referral was made to an ILP in the city, which quickly established that there were no apartments for rent in Cathy's town. After numerous calls, the ILP found a couple in their thirties with an extra room in their house who knew Cathy from their church. The children's service ran a background check on the couple, checked out their house, and approved of the placement. Cathy completed her senior year while living in this host home, and after graduation from high school and discharge from care, she worked out an

agreement to stay living with the host family, paying them \$150 toward room and board, until the end of the summer, when she would move into a college dorm.

Bobby, age seventeen and a half, lived in a group home successfully. He was referred to an ILP and placed in his own apartment. He did well for a while, but once school started, numerous friends found out that he lived in his own place, and it became party central. In spite of many conversations between Bobby and ILP staff, the place remained out of control. Bobby was removed from the apartment and placed in the agency's shelter for two weeks. He then was allowed to return to the apartment with a written behavioral contract. The second time around, things went more smoothly.

Susan, age seventeen, was referred to an ILP after doing well in a foster home for over three years. She was placed in a supervised apartment with three units for youth and one for a resident manager. Susan did well in the program and after four months moved into an apartment rented from a private landlord. Three months later, her foster sister moved in with her, after clearing this with the landlord. When Susan leaves the system, she and her new roommate will be able to split the rent and utility bills and will take over the lease.

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### *Assumptions underlying the scattered-site apartment program model*

The following points outline the reasoning behind Lighthouse's model of choice:

- Youth learn best by doing, feeling directly the consequences of their actions (within reason, of course).
- Youth learn best when they have to. No classes or training can have the impact of a month of living alone in an apartment, feeling

the responsibility for time management, apartment management, shopping, food preparation, and other life activities.

- An organization does not have to purchase and maintain a piece of property. Clients can be accepted immediately if apartments can be located with landlords willing to rent to teens.

- The clients can choose a location that is convenient for them and close to work, school, and their social support network.

- The clients can keep the apartment, the furnishings, and the security deposit and leave the system with a fully furnished living arrangement with long-term possibilities.

- The size of the program is not limited to the number of agency-owned apartment units.

- Group and crowd control problems are not the primary issue. Most problems reported by supervised apartment programs are interactive problems between residents. In a sense, they are like group homes with less supervision.

- In an independent apartment, a youth is challenged to develop an internal locus of control—to realize that his or her actions must be self-generated and not due to the presence of a caregiver or enforcer.

- The transition to self-reliant living will be smoother if the living arrangement resembles the future situation of the youth. The jump from a program with an abundance of resources, staff, and other people to life alone can be unsettling and confusing.

- The youth must develop coping skills to deal with loneliness and control of visitors and assertive skills to deal with fellow tenants, landlords, and other social situations that he or she is protected from in a supervised setting.

- The scattered-site model is an ideal public-private partnership, with community landlords receiving a large portion of the program's budget and available housing being used fully. It makes the best use of what is already there.

- For many of the young adults who enter the system or are otherwise without a true home, their central issue is having some control over their lives. Giving them personal space is perhaps the most significant form of empowerment.

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### *Supervising youth in less restrictive transitional living arrangements*

All youth leave the child welfare system, whether they are ready or not. Many communities are developing program strategies in which youth can get some experience living independently while still in custody.

When a youth leaves his or her place of residence and is out in the community, it does not matter whether he or she lives in a foster or group home, residential treatment center, or scattered-site apartment. A youth who is looking for trouble will find it. From our experience, most of our agency youth assault, runaway, destruction of property, and theft charges happen while they are at home or living in supervised settings. In other words, even with sixty to eighty youth living on their own, we do not experience any more or fewer problems than occur in any placement setting.

Of course, this does not mean that youth in individual scattered-site apartment or semisupervised group living situations need no attention. Here is a summary of what I learned about supervising youth in ILPs:

- **Live-in staff.** Some programs have apartments with live-in adult roommates or small shared homes with a live-in resident manager who is in and out of the residence at various times. Sometimes there is no supervision, but the adult is present at night and various times during the week and weekend. With random visits by day staff, this situation can work for semiresponsible youth.
- **Daily visits by staff.** This is hard to provide due to caseload size and budget limitations, but some high-risk youth do well with this level of supervision.
- **Unannounced visits.** This strategy is sometimes effective when youth are breaking program rules or there are reports of illegal or unusual activities. Youth need to be informed that this is a possibility at all times but is usually used only when problems are being reported.
- **Weekly visits.** This is the typical scattered-site method of keeping an eye on a youth living alone. Along with regular telephone contact, phone texting, and even e-mails, youth and adults can feel at ease.

- Youth come to the ILP office. This can be a daily expectation for new or unproductive youth or can happen several times a week. Some youth show up daily even when they are not required to do so.

- Former foster parent monitoring. Our program has contacted with former foster parents who are leaving a foster home in a rural area. This builds on an existing positive relationship and cuts down on ILP staff travel time and expenses.

- An in-town person with social services experience for monitoring. We have contracted with a local person for youth who leave a placement situation in a distant community but are connected to school and work and want to remain in that area.

- Regular telephone contact. If a youth is struggling with behavioral or medical problems, this is a good way to keep on top of the situation. Asking the youth to call the office daily to report activities is sometimes an expectation for new clients.

- Weekly visits by volunteers, mentors, and student interns. Often programs have support staff who do home visits, one-on-one life skills training, or in-home counseling. These visits can take the place of or enhance paid staff visits.

- Electronic monitoring bracelets with an early curfew. Our program requires this for high-risk youth who enter the program with felony offenses. Youth can have them removed after meeting the terms of a behavioral contract, usually after four to six weeks.

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### ***Risk management for less supervised living arrangements***

Liability issues are always raised when agencies start considering using semisupervised living arrangements such as scattered-site apartments for independent living preparation. The first law of youth work often applies: every helpful action is met with an immediate inappropriate reaction. Probably most agency executives who have been involved in using individual apartments would say that they have found this model to be no more or less risky than any other child welfare living arrangement. From my experience, group homes and residential treatment

centers are where most of the property damage, assaults, thefts, and runaways occur. Nevertheless, programs need to do whatever possible to keep from incurring liability and the wrath of an angry landlord.

Here are some basic things that need to be in place:

- **Effective screening.** Agencies must know as much as possible about a youth before placing him or her in an apartment. At times, referring agencies leave out (inadvertently or not) key details, such as sex offenses, previous property damage, or fire-setting behavior. Some high-risk youth might need increased supervision or need to prove themselves in a more supervised setting before moving into their own place.

- **Documentation.** Keeping track of all face-to-face unannounced visits and telephone contacts can eliminate any charges of neglect.

- **Clear policies.** A detailed policy and rules manual is needed that clearly lays out expectations. In addition, the youth signs a form stating that he or she has read the policies, understands them, and agrees to follow them. Discovering that a new female client has set up a day care center for all of her new relatives in her new apartment might seem outrageous, but this might be an expectation coming from her family.

- **Court-supported signed agreements.** This acknowledges that the court system has approved a living arrangement .

- **Clear emergency procedures and around-the-clock on-call.** ILPs using individual apartments need to have people assigned (usually on a rotating basis) to be on call for after-hours emergencies. Many of the calls received after hours can be dealt with over the telephone. Many youth will create a pseudo crisis during their first month in an apartment just to see if there really is anyone out there.

- **Liability insurance.** Each agency has to decide the level of comfort with the risk it is taking. Some programs insure each apartment. Others have been able to include any apartment in their overall umbrella policy.

- **Backup living arrangements.** Having an out-of-control youth living in an apartment rented from a landlord who calls daily ask-

ing for the youth to be removed is one of the biggest headaches of an ILP staffer. Having a shelter, respite foster home, spot in a group home, or some other temporary placement can immediately cool down a hot situation and help the youth understand the limits of what other people will tolerate.

- Quick confrontation of problems. Agency personnel who think someone else has moved into the apartment, hear about drug deals going on, or get calls about the “pit bulls for sale” sign in a client’s window must deal with these situations immediately. Waiting for problems to go away can lead to much bigger problems.

- Mandatory counseling if necessary. Youth with a previous history of suicide attempts, serious mental illness, alcohol or chemical dependency, and similar other problems should contract to continue with therapy or support groups as a condition of remaining in a less supervised setting.

- Contracts. Short-term behavioral contracts can help a youth understand the consequences of his or her current behavior, including discharge from the program or return to a more supervised setting.

- Daily contact with high-risk youth. Programs should plan on some youth occasionally needing more attention. Youth who get depressed, sick, traumatized, injured, or lose someone important should have daily face-to-face or telephone contacts, not necessarily with the same ILP staff.

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### ***Changing the child welfare system to benefit youth***

This section looks at the strategies used for moving from a protection stance to a supportive letting-go process for youth in transition.

#### ***State Level***

At the state level, providers had to be given a chance to prove that new living arrangement models could work. Only after several years of trial and error on the part of several nonprofit pioneers were the Ohio State codes changed to allow less supervised settings liked scattered sites to be considered a legitimate part of the child

welfare system. The state brought in professionals at every level to develop the new codes and took the leap of faith necessary to make licensing reflect the needs of youth for more real-life experience and less protection. Eventually the state had to let go of the idea of preapproving every apartment site and instead licensed agencies to provide IL services and self-monitor the youth. From the Lighthouse point of view, this has worked well, with local children's services staff and nonprofit care providers working together to assess safety issues.

### *County level*

At the county level, independent living and children's services case-workers had to learn to allow youth to make mistakes and learn from hundreds of poor decisions. Just like any parent, staff had to learn how not to be helpful and let natural consequences provide feedback to youth on their own for the first time. For example, we had many arguments about whether a youth who spent his food allowance on new shoes should be given more money for food or allowed to go hungry for a few days. These discussions still take place, but there is now much more system cohesiveness about these issues. The local children's services system also had to reconfigure its budget and accounting processes to pay for placement options other than foster homes, group homes, and residential treatment centers. It took years to work out the details. Juvenile court personnel had to let go of many controls and disciplinary procedures in order to sanction individual apartment placements. It did not make sense to put someone on house arrest who was two months from being discharged from the system and needed to be looking for a job.

### *Agency level*

At the agency level, the Lighthouse board of trustees had to assume new liability, new on-call systems, backup living arrangements for those who were out of control, and means of moving youth around the area. Independent living staff had to convince



private landlords to try renting to a youth not known to independent living and had to work out lease agreements that worked for all. The agency had to work out agreements with its shelter program and group homes for youth who needed to be stepped back in placement and had to convince referring agencies that moving unsuccessful youth to a new site for a second chance could lead to better outcomes.

### *Program level*

At the program level, staff had to develop a program without the benefit of much field literature, research, or other providers' experiences. They had to get used to continuous criticism from everybody about what youth needed. Independent living staff had to let go of having one set of rules for everyone and had to define success differently for each youth.

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### *Lessons learned in the past twenty years*

The transition process rarely goes as planned. Emotions of youth run high when they are getting cut off from system support and realizing painful family realities plus the fact that the welfare system that supported their parents no longer exists. There is no adult system ready to take over where the youth system left off.

Many foster youth do not show much maturity when they are eighteen but often do several years later (similar to their live-at-home cohorts). Few of our clients are ready for this experience. We put them out on their own because they do not have the time to grow up as youth from normal families do. We force them to deal with practical adult issues in an unrealistically short period of time. Age eighteen is no longer the normal age at which youth are able move out from normal families of origin.

Many youth kicked out of ILP have returned later in good shape, and the opposite situation occurs as well. We should expect that our youth will go through many ups and downs for years after they

leave us. Even youth who leave as planned will probably need help in the future, just as youth from normal families do. Our county's aftercare system is better than most others in the country but is not realistically funded. Former ILP participants will need financial support in the future, even if it is just one-time rent help.

No one living arrangement works for all youth. The system needs to have multiple options: small, supervised group settings; individual apartments; host homes; access to emergency short-term shelters; relative placements; boarding homes; and other arrangements. No one knows how a particular youth will do when first on his or her own. Second chances in a different location can work out.

Some youth do better alone than in groups. They might not be very productive, but they will have fewer fights and runaways. Youth who have never lived in a group setting might be threatened by sharing a place with numerous other people with similar problems. Youth with attachment disorders more often than not are unable to adjust to even a small group living situation.

Many of the youth in the system will need adult support for the rest of their lives. They will never have the emotional stability, intelligence, or common sense needed to function in our complicated world without someone around to explain things and help clean up their messes. If communities do not connect them to another support system, they will often end up getting connected in jails, emergency rooms, and psychiatric units, and this is not cheaper for a community.

When youth leave the child welfare system on negative terms, they usually don't leave the community they live in. They are still here and still need a place to stay and supports.

Our county's year-round self-sufficiency training program makes a difference for independent living youth. The youth who complete this thirteen-part training know what to expect if they eventually move into their own apartment, and it gets their care providers thinking more about their clients' futures too.

We are able to use low-income housing for youth who are getting ready to live on their own but cannot afford their current

apartments. However, waiting lists continue to lengthen, and housing people want to see juvenile court records and proof of a job.

We are not having enough success with males in general. They should be kept in care longer than females, who tend to mature earlier.

Our goal is to slowly have youth take over all responsibilities. Teaching staff how “not to be helpful” is important. Enabling leads to more dependence on the system.

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### ***Advice for those courageous enough to make changes to help youth***

The advice that follows reflects years of experience with supporting youth in transition and is intended as a guide for practice.

### ***Preparing youth for independent living***

We have devised this list of fifty ways to help youth get ready for independent living:

1. Help them get an original copy of their birth certificate.
2. Help them get a social security card (and a wallet to put it in).
3. Enroll them in a school program in which they can succeed.
4. Help them get a picture identification card.
5. Find out if they are eligible for a Medicaid card.
6. Help them get copies of medical records.
7. Start a “life book” that will contain important papers, pictures of family, and other mementos.
8. Help them open up a bank account.
9. Teach them how to write and cash a check.
10. Line them up with a dentist whom they can continue to use.
11. Line them up with a doctor whom can use when they are on their own.
12. Help them put together a family scrapbook.
13. Help them renew contact with family members.
14. Help them develop at least one friendship.
15. Line them up with a good counselor.

16. Take them to join a local recreation center.
17. Teach them some new ways to have fun.
18. Connect them with a church group.
19. Help them find a better-paying job.
20. Make sure they really understand birth control.
21. Show them the best places to shop for food, clothing, and furniture.
22. Help them learn how to look up resources in the telephone book.
23. Help them work through an independent living skills workbook.
24. Teach them how to read a map.
25. Take them on a tour of the city.
26. Teach them how to use the bus system and read bus schedules.
27. Buy them an alarm clock, and teach them how to use it.
28. Show them how to use the library and get a library card.
29. Help them get a driver's license and price insurance.
30. Role-play contacts with police, bank tellers, doctors, and others.
31. Role-play several different styles of job interviews.
32. Help them put together a résumé and an application fact sheet.
33. Make a list of important telephone numbers.
34. Teach them how to cook five good meals.
35. Teach them how to store food.
36. Teach them how to use coupons and comparison-shop.
37. Teach them how to read a paycheck stub.
38. Teach them how to use an oven and microwave.
39. Teach them how to thoroughly clean a kitchen and bathroom.
40. Take them to a session of adult court: traffic and criminal.
41. Tell them how to get a lawyer and when to get one.
42. Help them understand a lease or rental agreement.
43. Teach them how to do their taxes.
44. Teach them how to write a letter and mail it.
45. Help them develop good telephone communication skills.
46. Go over tenant and landlord rights.
47. Help them find a safe, inexpensive place to live.
48. Teach them how to budget their money.
49. Help them find and get along with a potential roommate.
50. Talk to them often about feelings about going out on their own.

***Learning independent living skills the hard way***

Independent skills do not always come easily.

- Some learn money management by going without food for a few days after spending their money on nonessential purchases.
- Some learn time management after they are evicted from their apartment due to nonpayment of rent caused by lack of income due to being fired for being late at work too many times.
- Some learn to clean their apartment after they see roaches everywhere.
- Some learn personal hygiene after figuring out that nobody will go out with them.
- Some learn to control their anger after spending a month in jail due to excessive fighting.
- Some learn to eat well when they realize they cannot fit into their clothing and cannot afford to buy more.
- Some stop drinking after losing their driver's license and having to take the bus to work.
- Some stop using drugs when they find out they cannot get a job unless they can pass a drug screen.
- Some learn to control their friends at their apartment after losing their third deposit due to being evicted because of too much partying.
- Some learn to pay their rent on time after finding all of their possessions sitting on the curb in front of their apartment.
- Some learn the importance of an education when they always get beaten out for a promotion or better job by people who have degrees and more training.
- Some never learn.

***Developing independent living housing options***

There are a variety of independent housing options:

- Try to find a place the youth can keep after discharge from care.
- Try to find a place that the youth can afford (with a roommate, subsidy, savings, or something else).

- Try to find a place in an area comfortable or familiar to the youth.
- Keep safety and security issues in mind.
- Find places with access to transportation, employment, shopping, and other services.
- Try to give the youth at least six months' experience in a living arrangement prior to discharge. Expect lots of mistakes, problems, and dumb choices.
- Have backup plans in place for youth who cannot handle the less supervised settings.
- Understand that youth might need to be moved around several times before they learn what it takes to be a responsible tenant.
- If your agency can't create alternative living arrangements, contract with someone who already has them in place or is willing to give it a try.
- Try to create a program that is flexible, responsive to clients' needs, and cost-effective.
- Educate (continuously) key systems people about the importance of experience and the need to have affordable housing lined up at discharge.
- Understand that developing a full continuum of living arrangements takes years.
- Hire staff who are experienced, tolerant, creative problem solvers, and have a rich sense of humor.
- Understand that liability issues are no more or less an issue than in any type of child welfare placement, but be sufficiently insured anyway.

### *Housing cost considerations*

The following costs need to be addressed when considering housing options:

- Zoning
- Licensing requirements and limitations
- Time until start-up
- Insurance
- Required building safety upgrades

- Staff coverage requirements
- Neighborhood issues: residents uneasy about the possibility of this housing in their neighborhood, police awareness, safety issues, convenience
- School district issues
- Location preferred by clients
- Accessibility
- Affordability for the long term for the client
- Referral source choice
- Court support and choice
- Length of time the client can stay
- Potential for and consequences of being closed by the agency or community
- Client contribution
- Grants to support the property or do rehabilitation
- Donated property
- Staff backup for supervised apartments
- Vacations, sick days, and training days
- Site reputation
- Reusability of apartment by other clients

### ***Recommended Reading***

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