

Spotlight Series: Overcoming Rural Specific Obstacles

Introduction

Across the U.S., experiences of homelessness and access to resources vary. Individuals experiencing homelessness in rural communities often face obstacles that look different from homelessness in major cities. Rural communities typically do not have large encampments or individuals living on streets and thoroughfares. Rather, individuals who are experiencing homelessness in rural places are likely camping in the woods, staying in abandoned buildings, sheds, or lean-tos, living in their cars, or couch surfing. This decreased visibility can make it harder to identify youth experiencing homelessness in rural communities.¹ Despite the hidden nature of youth in rural areas, rates of homelessness among youth are similar to those in urban areas.² This demonstrates the need to develop targeted and innovative strategies to reach those hidden youth and other young adults experiencing homelessness in rural communities.

Since 2016, HUD has invested nearly \$39M of Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) funds in rural efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. The YHDP requirements, which include broad community partnership and investment; assessment of the needs of marginalized persons; creation and support of a Youth Action Board (YAB); and development of a coordinated community plan, are major milestones for any community. Rural communities have the added challenge of undertaking these tasks across landscapes that are typically vast, scarcely populated, and under-resourced. Through HUD's investment in seventeen rural YHDP sites, we have learned about a variety of obstacles impacting efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. Our goal in this article is to offer community-based solutions to these obstacles. We hope this provides our rural partners with ideas on addressing their own obstacles towards ending youth homelessness.

¹ 2018. Chapin Hall. Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in Rural America. Available at: <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Homelessness-in-Rural-America.pdf>

² 2018. Chapin Hall. Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. *National Estimates*. Available at: <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

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Racial and LGBTQ Equity

In June 2020, Norm Suchar, SNAPS Director, sent a message to all YHDP-funded communities calling for greater racial equity through investment in anti-racist policies and leadership of Black and Brown youth and young adults, resource allocation to places with the greatest disparities, and a call to action for all to commit to broadening racial and anti-oppression learning and unlearning. Youth and young adults that identify as Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC), and those that identify as LGBTQ+ have long faced systemic, social, and health inequities. Those working in the field of youth homelessness know that many of the youth and young adults that are served identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or both.³ For BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth that live in rural places, identification with one or both communities can lead to discrimination, isolation, additional safety considerations, and in some cases, violence. Investment in YHDP projects presents the opportunity to right these inequities.

For the Montana Balance of State, a YHDP community that covers 140,000 square miles and 7 federally recognized tribes, equity was at the forefront of all planning efforts, with intentional inclusion of Indigenous members within the core planning team and YAB. They found success in this approach by partnering with a school system that supported Indigenous youth and assisted youth to attend virtual and in-person meetings. Montana furthered its equity work by setting a goal for its YAB membership to be majority BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and pregnant and parenting youth. Additionally, each project that applied for funding had to include an equity component, and if funded, projects will have to demonstrate how they are measuring equity growth and success throughout implementation. The intentional focus on equity ensures that all stakeholders play a role in furthering equity across the state.

In the New Mexico Balance of State, the YHDP planning team used its data to inform its equity and inclusion goals, noting that a majority of youth that moved through its coordinated entry system identified as Indigenous or Hispanic. Upon learning this they encouraged youth shelters to hire Indigenous staff to better reflect shelter demographics. Similarly, when the data showed low numbers of youth that identified as LGBTQ+, they concluded that LGBTQ+ youth were inaccurately underrepresented in the homeless response system. The youth providers sought out new hires that identified with the LGBTQ+ community, and New Mexico's youth count soon reflected higher rates of youth that identified as queer or trans. The community attributes this to youth feeling more comfortable seeking support from staff that represent their community(s). New Mexico has seen progress towards greater racial and LGBTQ+ equity due to centering both as core priorities of its YHDP project.

In addition to the approaches by Montana and New Mexico, communities can work with their YHDP technical assistance (TA) providers to tailor YHDP curriculum and effectively approach

³ 2018. Chapin Hall. Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America. *National Estimates*. Available at: <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

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equity conversations with community stakeholders. This may include taking additional time to build trust among the stakeholders and reorganizing project milestones so communities can prepare and create space for authentic and difficult conversations. TA providers can help model how to approach pronoun discussions or how white partners can actively show up as aspiring allies. Given the critical importance of equity in this work and in society, YHDP communities must determine how they will center equity and lift up the voices of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals in every conversation.

SNAPS encourages all YHDP recipients to take steps to appropriately address racial inequities. Acknowledging racial equity and its challenges, SNAPS recently produced a variety of TA documents to assist communities, which can be found [here](#). Two resources that can help communities plan and implement an equitable approach include those linked below:

- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response Increasing Equity in the Homeless Response System Through Expanding Procurement](#)
- [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Equity-Driven Changes to Coordinated Entry Prioritization](#)

YAB Recruitment and Retention Solutions

Youth and young adults must lead the development of a youth homeless system and youth voice must be an integral part of every conversation and decision. At the center of YHDP is the YAB, the decision-making entity where youth and young adults provide leadership and direction to the larger community and are supported by adult partners in this work. Successful YABs feature strong governance models (youth-led and adult supported) and a robust recruitment and retention plan. For rural communities, YAB recruitment and retention can be difficult across a vast and sparsely populated geography. To address this type of obstacle, the Nebraska Balance of State built two key features into its strategy: 1) belief that any involvement in the YAB is valuable involvement, and 2) creating regional YABs that feed into a statewide YAB. Given the belief that any involvement by youth is valuable, the Nebraska YAB allows for fluid membership. This allows youth and young adults to participate when and how they want to, including the ability to step away for a time. Additionally, Nebraska had a built-in youth network through the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation's Connected Youth Initiative program. This program provided grants to six rural communities that adapted an older youth system of care model to address issues facing runaway and homeless youth, young people aging out of foster care, and young people with experience in the juvenile justice system. This regional structure allows ideas and perspectives to feed into the statewide YAB and offers the opportunity for regional YAB members to be invested in the state's YHDP efforts. The YABs get together at least annually to focus on statewide strategies to end youth homelessness.

Other recommendations to support YAB success include: 1) paid staff positions, such as a YHDP Coordinator, to support the YAB and paid positions within the YHDP projects/community for

youth and young adults with lived experience; 2) adopting a value of flexibility and adapting to the YAB's needs and requests, including leadership and advocacy; and 3) paying YAB members a prevailing wage for their time and effort. Montana's YHDP project recently increased its YAB compensation to \$25 per hour. These activities recognize the importance of youth voice, support youth leadership, and set policy in communities for ongoing youth involvement and decision-making.

COVID-19 is challenging for retention of YAB members as in-person gatherings have been cancelled and social distancing remains in effect for the foreseeable future. New Mexico's YHDP project has seen its YAB participation dwindle since COVID-19 began. To reconnect with existing YAB members and recruit new members, New Mexico took to social media to announce a virtual party to celebrate its one-year YHDP anniversary. They began advertising the party one month prior to the event, sent out custom designed t-shirts, secured gift cards as giveaways, and invited Lady Shug, an Indigenous, non-binary entertainer, to join and lend her voice to the cause. During the virtual event, youth who attended received gift cards and the YHDP team offered an open invitation to all youth who attended to join or reconnect with the YAB. The event offered maximum benefit for minimal cost, and New Mexico now has a platform to connect with new and existing YAB members and disseminate information about its project.

Eliminating the Geography Barrier

Rural places typically span large geographic expanses. The inherent challenge to these communities is the space between towns where services and service providers are typically located. Bringing stakeholders together in these communities takes time, effort, and money – both in travel expenses and time spent driving to and from in-person meetings. As we have all learned this year, virtual solutions are critical to connecting with others when we cannot be in person. YHDP communities that have invested in virtual platforms have seen success in bringing stakeholders together, despite the geographic challenge. The Nebraska Balance of State CoC, housed within the University of Nebraska system, leveraged the university's virtual platform to connect with stakeholders across the state, including its most rural parts. The platform has the ability for video or phone connection, which is key because some providers do not have video capability on their computers. Additionally, Nebraska's YHDP project engaged in remote planning as much as possible and brought stakeholders together for one in-person planning meeting. The meeting's agenda was packed but they were able to get a lot accomplished because stakeholders had established relationships with one another through the virtual platform. Local philanthropy covered the travel costs for providers and youth and young adults to attend the meeting, eliminating the cost burden that would have prevented many key stakeholders from attending. Other solutions to geography include:

1. Investing in regional coalitions that can feed into the larger YHDP project – this can increase investment in the YHDP project on a very local level and create a youth leadership pipeline representative of all parts of the YHDP coverage area; and
2. Investing in technology that provides support for service providers and youth and young adults that may not have resources to participate in planning meetings and the YHDP project, such as technology described in this [CoC FAQ on the HUD Exchange](#).

Increasing Staff and Provider Capacity

On average, rural communities have *one nonprofit* for every 50 square miles, while in *urban* areas there is *one nonprofit* every half of a square mile.⁴ As such, nonprofits in rural communities are expected to wear many hats, offer multiple services, and cover large areas. This creates a capacity issue and nonprofits may not have the time, staff, or bandwidth to take on new activities. Successful YHDP communities have many and varied stakeholders that are invested in the project and a lead that is solely focused on the project. This means investing time and money in people, which likely involves hiring new staff or reconfiguring organizational charts so that YHDP staff are focused only on YHDP. When hiring, YHDP projects should keep equity at the forefront of the process, by following the steps in this document about “[Equity Capacity Building: Hiring, Supervision, Training](#)” found on the HUD Exchange. Rural communities that struggle to find staff can outsource to consultants and consider other partners, such as local colleges and faith communities, which can all contribute to increased capacity.

To support and expand learning among its CoC provider network, Montana offered a series of trainings informed by its YAB and led by its YHDP Coordinator, in collaboration with members of its Executive Planning Committee. These trainings served to set a baseline knowledge for all projects and set a precedent for ongoing training based upon the community’s needs throughout its 2-year YHDP process. Other recommendations to support organizational capacity include: 1) developing capacity building plans for new YHDP projects which creates a blueprint for the YHDP Coordinator/Lead and projects on steps needed to build capacity to serve youth and young adults successfully; 2) identifying organizational mentors – youth providers that have extensive experience can offer peer learning and guidance to new youth providers to build new project capacity, and 3) retaining a focus on relationship building – continuing to bring in stakeholders and ensuring a role for each new partner is key to a community-wide investment in YHDP success.

⁴ Neuhoff, Alex and Duncleman, Andrew (2011). Small but Tough: Nonprofits in Rural America. Available at: https://www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/Images/articles/small-but-tough-nonprofits-in-rural-america/Small-but-Tough_-Nonprofits-in-Rural-America.pdf

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Conclusion

Rural communities and providers are familiar with adaptability and often do many things with fewer resources. Like rural communities, YHDP projects are also always evolving; successful projects must adapt as resources and needs change. At the core of each is community strength and resilience. Rural, YHDP communities featured in this article approached challenges with creativity, drawing on community strengths and centering youth voice and equity. These values are crucial to any community, rural, suburban, or urban, to end youth homelessness.