

HELPING YOUTH **THRIVE**

HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS



PLWG
PROGRAM LEADERS
WORKING GROUP



FACT SHEET

4/12

4-H Program Leaders Working Group
Access, Equity and Belonging Committee

Youth Experiencing Homelessness

April 2022

Why an Equity Lens?

4-H has made a bold commitment to youth across the United States: to reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs, and social conditions of the country (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). 4-H has affirmed that we will help close the opportunity gap for marginalized youth and communities to fully thrive (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 4-H, 2019; National 4-H Council, 2020). Making good on these promises requires that all those working with youth in 4-H critically analyze current programs and deliver those programs through an equity lens. Administrators, professionals, volunteers, and stakeholders have a responsibility to be aware of and confront the disparities that exist within 4-H programs and in society. Doing so is critical because those who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities is perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018). The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2018) describes the process of positive youth development in 4-H. We should explore the 4-H Thriving Model, our national theoretical framework, with the same level of critical review to ensure it guides our work with equity and social justice at the forefront.

The 4-H Program Leaders Working Group, Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee (AEBC) has joined with the 4-H Thriving Model Taskforce to ensure this nationally adopted model is explored and utilized through an equity lens. The following fact sheet explores the Thriving Model in relation to youth experiencing homelessness.

The vast diversity of youth experiencing homelessness served by Cooperative Extension (Extension) professionals is robust. The diversity of cultures within youth requires an Extension professional first to familiarize themselves with the unique culture, socio-economic ecosystem, and history of the cultural group they plan to work with in order to ensure a level of success. An equity lens will allow an Extension practitioner to understand the specific conditions they must consider when planning to program with youth experiencing homelessness. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

Social Conditions of Youth Population

Youth experiencing homelessness (YEH) are broadly defined as children and young people who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This could include youth living in homeless shelters and transitional housing, hotels or motels, and unsheltered settings; and those who are couch surfing, doubling up, or sharing housing with others due to a loss of housing, natural disaster, economic hardship, running away or being kicked out from home, or a similar reason. In 2019, 1.39 million students (1 in 39 students) were identified by schools as YEH (National Center for Homeless Education, 2021).

While rural and urban youth experience similar rates of homelessness, certain subpopulations of youth are at a disproportionately higher risk for experiencing homelessness, specifically youth of color (African American - 83% higher than other races; Hispanic - 33% higher than non-Hispanic youth); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth (LGBTQ, 120% higher compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth); and youth who are parents (200% higher than non-parenting peers) (Morton et al, 2017).

Competencies Needed to Engage Youth Population

Staff who work with youth experiencing homelessness will especially need the following competencies:

1. Understanding how implicit social bias affects our work with youth who are experiencing homelessness.
2. Developing inclusive programming and policies that better reach youth experiencing homelessness.
3. Cultivating partnerships with entities and organizations in their community to provide more effective outreach for youth experiencing homelessness.

4. Providing training for staff in programs such as “Mental Health First Aid ” offered by the National Council on Mental Health and Wellbeing, and “Question, Persuade, Refer” provided by the QPR Institute. Staff will benefit from professional development in Trauma Informed Care and other related education about mental health and making connections to appropriate services. Refer to the resources section for information on these opportunities.

Youth Belonging and Participation in 4-H

Youth experiencing homelessness come from varied socio-economic, cultural, and demographic backgrounds. Due to the intersectionality of this population, 4-H professionals should be aware and implement strategies that acknowledge the whole child, including their gender identification, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, etc. For further information and appropriate strategies, please refer to the other AEBC Youth Fact Sheets for the cultural, LGBTQ+, and racial demographics as well as the socio-economic backgrounds of the YEH that the 4-H professional is working with.

Staff should strive for the following to ensure youth experiencing homelessness can participate in Extension programs (Forstadt et al., 2020):

- Provide YEH appropriate support, which could include:
 - Hosting individual meetings with an adult guardian (parents, foster parents, other guardians), if possible. These private meetings can help build trust, psychological safety, and continuity of care.
 - Communicating with youth and an adult guardian via social media or text apps that only require wi-fi, which can be available for free.
 - Providing transportation options such as gas cards, bus passes, Uber or Lyft gift cards, or other localized transit options.
 - Considering basic needs before other needs are met (Maslow’s hierarchy of needs): food, health care, sanitation (clean clothes), etc.
 - Having a plan in place and funding for purchasing items needed for programming.
 - Providing childcare for youth who are parenting.
 - Providing referrals to other agencies and community support.
 - Seeking financial support for special needs of YEH, such as food and hygiene needs.
- Youth voice is important in all Positive Youth Development, and YEH will need support from staff to ensure their voice is heard. Examples include serving on an advisory group and using alternative methods such as notes or comment cards instead of expecting oral communication as the only mode of communication from the beginning.
- Particularly relevant educational programs may include help preparing a resume, role-playing a job interview, and helping youth to practice communication skills (problem solving, conflict resolution, listening, assertive communication, etc.)
- Ensure a safe space for youth to participate. Trust and relationship building may take longer but these are key for providing a safe place for YEH participants. Keep in mind that youth who experience homelessness may be more likely to experience bullying and have extra needs for privacy. Don’t ask them to share their experiences in front of other youth but do support them if they volunteer to share their experiences with others.
- Recognize immediate needs that should be addressed first, such as food/shelter/hygiene, as well as mental health issues and trauma experiences before other education takes place.
- Create an inclusive environment by utilizing inclusive language about housing or daily needs. Use wording like “where you currently stay” vs. “at your house.”
- Recognize unintentional program barriers that may prevent participation. Try to discover the barriers. Examples may include time of meetings, locations, advertised costs, time commitment, parental involvement requirements, transportation, and more.
- Implement flexibility in rules for participation, funding, awards, and recognition as much as possible.

- Consider legal and risk management concerns if you are working with youth who are separated from parents. For example:
 - Educate yourself on your state's requirements for mandated reporting if youth share, they are experiencing abuse or neglect, including abandonment by parents or legal guardians.
 - Consider how YEH might be able to participate in components of Extension programs that don't require a parent/guardian to sign documents and forms.
 - Consider partnering with schools or other agencies that have responsibility for youth's safety and share responsibility.
 - Contact your local school district's Homeless Youth Liaison who may know the youth experiencing homelessness, what they are needing and how 4-H could be involved. Refer to the resources section below to find your local Homeless Youth Liaison.
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Community Relationships and Partners

Here are some examples of federal, national, and local agencies and local partners for youth experiencing homelessness.

Federal Agency Partners:

- Department of Education
- National Center for Homeless Education
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center
- Street Outreach Program
- Transitional Living Program
- Department of Housing and Urban Development

National Agencies:

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
- YMCA Safe Place
- Covenant House
- Salvation Army

Local Agencies:

- Grassroots organizations
- Homeless Shelters
- Local Food Pantries
- School district homeless youth liaisons
- Local YMCA
- Faith based communities and associations

Evaluation

There are several key concepts for staff who conduct program evaluations with youth experiencing homelessness to keep in mind. These include:

Evaluate program development and implementation processes

- Assess readiness of personnel to serve youth experiencing homelessness.
- Assess specific competencies of personnel for quality program implementation and evaluation. Evaluate gaps and provide suitable training to develop needed competencies.
- Consider process elements such as attrition rate and documentation of efforts made to increase participation.
- Provide ample opportunities for youth to give feedback on whether needs are being met and what programming should be provided to meet those needs.

Program Outcome Evaluation

- Consider what outcomes you are measuring and how you are measuring it before you start. Keep in mind that program success may not be limited to outcomes measurement. Program success with YEH could be that the youth show up regularly and participate, despite their living situation. They show up because they feel like they belong and matter. Measuring consistent participation supported by qualitative information about why the youth are committed to attend could be valuable information to support the importance of the program.
- Ensure you are protecting privacy/anonymity/protected or vulnerable status of YEH participants.
- Consider keeping in touch with YEH participants via social media as they may retain these accounts even when moving around. Ask for contact information for relatives or friends so that you can still locate them to check on them or follow up with them even if they move.
- Keep in mind that pre- and post- survey methods may be difficult with transient audiences. You may lose critical evaluation data as YEH participants may start a program late or leave before a full round of a program is completed. A good plan may be to do more frequent evaluation check-ins, process evaluations or qualitative evaluation methods (Acorda, Businelle, & Santa Maria, 2021).

Resources

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. (n.d.). State coordinator contact information. <https://naehcy.org/educational-resources/state-coordinator-contact-information/>
- National Council for Mental Wellbeing (n.d.). Mental Health First Aid. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>
- QPR Institute (n.d.). Question. Persuade. Refer. <https://qprinstitute.com/>
- Trauma Informed Care Implementation Resource Center (n.d.). Trauma-informed care. <https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>

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- United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 4-H. <https://nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/4-h-positive-youth-development>
- National Headquarters. (2017). Strategic plan: 4-H youth development: A 2025 vision. <https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resources/National%204-H%20Strategic%20Plan%202017.pdf>

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