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TOOLKIT FOR IDENTIFYING
YOUTH EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS IN THE JUSTICE
SYSTEM:
USING A STRUCTURED PROCESS
TO RECOGNIZE RED FLAGS AND
ENSURE HOUSING FIRST
APPROACHES

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Sometimes judges have sufficient information to know a youth is experiencing homelessness. Often, however, homelessness is hidden, and judges should understand what red flags or warning signs may indicate homelessness, and how to make decisions based on available information from the youth and other sources. Judges may also need to make decisions in court to ensure youth have a safe place to stay. The purpose of the Toolkit for Identifying Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the Justice System is to help judges:

- Develop and implement a process to identify local resources that support youth experiencing homelessness, and that can be used to make service referrals.
- Use an interactive court hearing checklist to identify

red flags and inform initial next steps.

The checklist is designed to walk judges through four steps:

1. Identify Red Flags
2. Gather More Information
3. Determine Housing First Needs [\[1\]](#)
4. Reduce Barriers to Safe and Secure Housing

While the checklist helps identify youth experiencing homelessness, identifying local resources is critical for judges to understand what housing plans or programs are available to meet the needs of those youth.



Identify Local Resources and Services

Court stakeholders, working across systems, should collaborate to create targeted resource maps that identify resources and services that will help youth find safe and secure housing. Targeted resource mapping can help jurisdictions:

- Identify existing resources for youth experiencing homelessness;
- Identify gaps in resources;
- Ensure safe and secure housing is available to youth; and
- Encourage collaboration and cultivate new partnerships and relationships between courts and service providers. [\[2\]](#).

Judicial officers should convene stakeholders across juvenile and family court systems to map resources or services in the community that specifically address youth homelessness. These stakeholders can include, but are not limited to – people who have experienced homelessness, child welfare and juvenile justice representatives, local school principals or counselors, child advocates, local youth programs, and community providers delivering services to people experiencing homelessness. The worksheet on pages 4 and 5 includes several housing plan/program types with definitions and spaces to add local resources or services available in the community. During the mapping process, stakeholders should work collaboratively to determine whether local resources and services meet the youths' needs by ensuring that services:

- are immediately accessible
- are individualized, flexible, and choice-based
- employ Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles
- are developmentally appropriate for youth
- include cultural humility
- are trauma-responsive
- emphasize family reunification and resiliency strategies
- are based on the Housing First approach [\[3\]](#).

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recommends using the Housing First Assessment Tool to strengthen and implement housing first approaches. The tool itself is housed on the [HUD Exchange](#). Consider using the tool after the targeted mapping process has been completed to ensure that the services/resources youth will be referred to are using a Housing First approach.

Housing Plans/Programs

Local Resources/ Services Available

Kinship Navigator Programs – These types of programs assist grandparents or other relatives raising children by linking them to needed benefits. [4]. These resources can help youth find safe and secure housing with a relative, if parents are not a safe option. If a gap is identified, download and read [Strategy Brief Strong Families: What are Kinship Navigator Programs](#), to assist in filling that gap in services. [5].

Drop-In Centers – These centers can serve as the first point of contact for youth who are experiencing homelessness. Ideally, these centers can meet the youth's basic needs (e.g., food, laundry, shower, health care, etc.). If a gap is identified, download and read [Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: Promising Program Models](#) (page 5). [6].

Youth Shelters and Emergency Services – This is a short-term solution for youth experiencing homelessness. Shelters and emergency services usually have easy access with minimal barriers. If a gap is identified, download and read [Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: Promising Program Models](#) (page 7). [7].

Housing Plans/Programs

Local Resources/
Services Available

Transitional Housing Programs –

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), “transitional housing (TH) is designed to provide homeless individuals and families with the interim stability and support to successfully move to and maintain permanent housing.” [8] Consider using when a youth needs short-term housing before more stable housing can be found.

Host Homes – Using host homes can be a cost-effective approach that offers a non-institutional environment in the community. This is a collaborative approach between the hosts and a service provider that arranges case coordination and other services. If a gap is identified, download and read [Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: Promising Program Models](#) (page 8). [9].

Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) – This can be an effective strategy for older youth who are struggling to connect with their families and for youth who could be successful living independently. This approach is meant to provide long-term, secure housing. If a gap is identified, download and read [Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: Promising Program Models](#) (page 10). [10].

Court Hearing Checklist

Use the sections below as a checklist to add important information that will lead to informed decisions regarding referral to housing services, as well as assisting the youth with other medical, school, and legal needs.

Step One: Identify red flags by recognizing current or past charges that are associated with youth homelessness.

Red Flags [11]	Current or Past Charges	Important Info/ Context
Truancy	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Loitering in outdoor places	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Curfew violations	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Shoplifting	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Exchanging sex for basic life needs	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Running Away	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Other survival acts	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

Step Two: Gather more information from the youth with targeted follow-up questions.

Youth commonly hide the fact that they are experiencing homelessness. Therefore, it is important to gather information that can provide more context to how the youth is currently living. If the red flags identified above prompt the judge and other stakeholders to believe the youth is experiencing homelessness, get additional information from the youth's social worker, probation counselor, or someone else who knows the youth, in written form before the court hearing, in order to avoid embarrassing or stigmatizing the youth. If necessary, take additional time to ask the youth the questions listed on pages seven and eight. The following script may be useful to initiate the conversation:

SAMPLE JUDICIAL SCRIPTS

- If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions to help me make a decision today. These questions will help me understand a little bit more about your day-to-day routine.
- Let's take some time to discuss your day-to-day routine. If I ask you a few questions, I think it will help me understand your movements throughout the day.
- I'd like to get a better picture of your day-to-day routine, so I'm going to ask you several questions. Please answer as honestly as you feel comfortable answering.


Important Considerations – Youth may not want to answer or won't answer honestly, so keep in mind that using these scripts may provoke an oppositional response in the youth. In addition, if the youth is being exploited, and the exploiter is in court, this could be problematic. It is important to thoughtfully consider the situation before asking follow-up questions.

~Honorable Barbara Mack, Seattle, Washington (Retired)

Follow-Up Questions [12]	Important Info/Context
How did you get to court today?	
Where do you go after school?	
Do you feel safe and secure in that environment?	
Do you have a key to the place where you are living?	
Do you need to carry all of your belongings with you?	
How are you paying for and preparing your food?	
Has there been a recent family breakup of any sort?	
How many times have you moved in the past year?	

Important Considerations – This information can provide more information, but it isn't the whole picture. For example, a youth may be couch surfing and have a key or be a victim of trafficking and have a key. In addition, be aware that some questions may shame the youth and their family, so consider having other stakeholders (e.g. probation counselors) provide this information off the record.

~ Honorable Barbara Mack, Seattle, Washington (Retired)



Step Three: Determine the housing needs of the youth.

Use the table below to identify service referrals and next steps that need to take place to ensure the youth is placed in safe and secure housing. It is also important to designate a person responsible for helping the youth engage with the services identified and to follow-up with the youth.



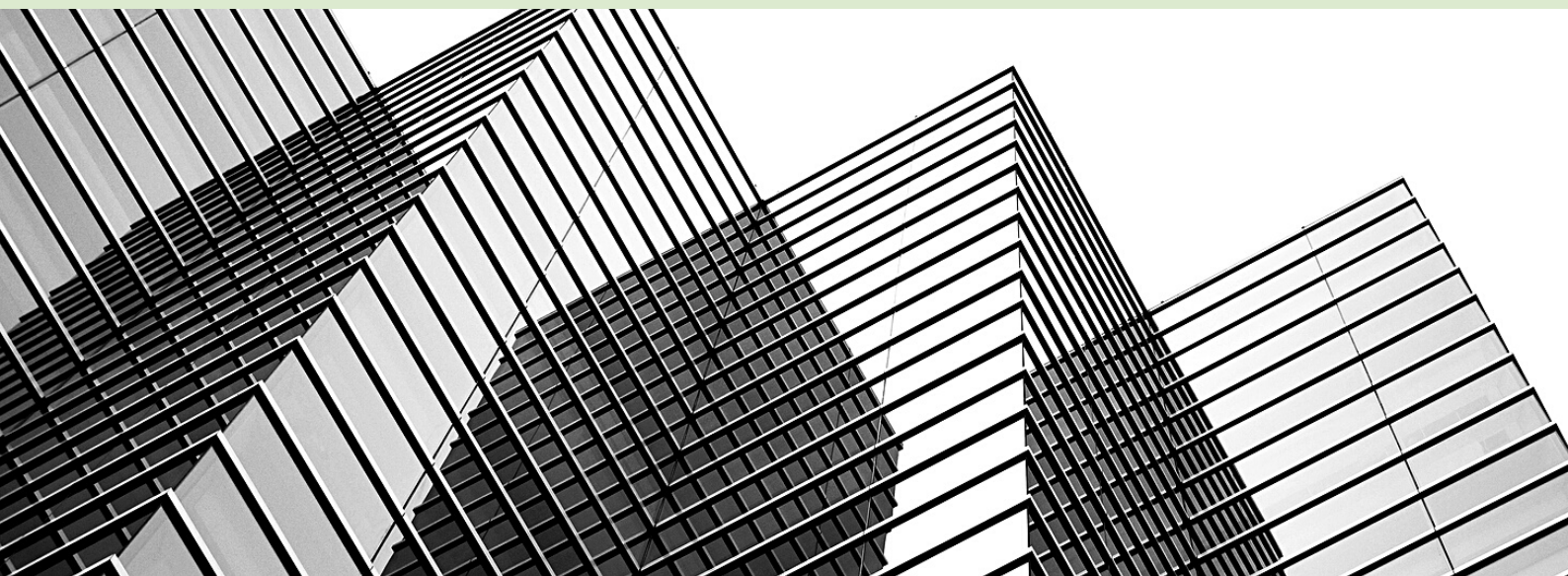
Housing Plans/ Programs	Service or Support Referrals	Next Steps & Responsible Person
Kinship Navigator Programs		
Drop-In Centers		
Youth Shelters and Emergency Services		
Host Homes		
Rapid Re-Housing (RRH)		
Other		

Step Four: Identify and reduce initial barriers to secure safe housing for the youth.

Use the checklist below to identify gaps or barriers that may impede the youth's ability to take advantage of services and supports ordered. If a barrier is identified, consider the potential solutions and ensure that the case managers, social workers, or probations officers are working to address the barriers identified.

Possible Gaps & Barriers [13]	Identified Barrier	Potential Solutions for Youth Case Managers, Social Workers, or Probation Officers
<p>Lack of State Issued Identification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing birth certificate • Cost of obtaining ID • Permanent residency 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help youth obtain birth certificate with fee and application assistance • Consider allowing youth to prove residency with a signed affidavit • Engage local Bar Assn for pro-bono help with legal documents (and ensuring youth rights are protected)
<p>Lack of Medical Insurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty understanding language in applications • Little or no coverage for certain types of health care 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help youth obtain medical insurance by providing application assistance • Work with local organizations that have services available at little to no cost (e.g., dental vans, mobile checkups, etc.)
<p>Lack of Access to Public Assistance (TANF, SNAP, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of transportation • Intimidating application process • SNAP Benefits run out 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide transportation assistance to get to local agencies • Help youth complete the application process • Work with youth to develop a monthly budget and weekly meal plans

Possible Gaps & Barriers [13]	Identified Barrier	Potential Solutions for Youth Case Managers, Social Workers, or Probation Officers
<p>Lack of Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of transit tickets/passes • Accumulated transit fines • Court orders barring individual youth from certain transit systems 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with local nonprofits that support access to public transportation • Partner with local businesses that can donate bus passes, cab vouchers, or Uber gift cards • Consider waiving transit fines or removing court orders that limit the youth's ability to use public transportation
<p>Ability to Register for School Without a Parent or Guardian</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immunization requirements • Lack of legal representation to advocate for education rights 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help youth retrieve their immunization records from past schools • Refer youth to the local health department to receive needed immunizations • Work with local legal support services to advocate for youth's right to education
<p>Additional Legal Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restitution • Lingering court fees/fines • Emancipation 	<p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider reducing fines or finding alternatives to fulfilling restitution orders • Work with local legal support services help youth file court documents when seeking emancipation from their parents or guardian



Endnotes

[1] Housing First is defined as "...an approach to quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements." Definition quoted from – HUD Exchange (2021, September 17). Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing Brief. Retrieved from Department of Housing and Urban Development: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3892/housing-first-in-permanent-supportive-housing-brief/>.

[2] The general framework of Targeted Resource Mapping for identifying services for youth who are experiencing homelessness was adapted from – Targeted Resource Mapping Toolkit: Mapping Resources Along a Continuum of Services to Address Substance Use Disorders. (2021). Reno, Nevada: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges – <https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/targeted-resource-mapping-toolkit-mapping-resources-along-a-continuum-of-services-to-address-substance-use-disorders/>.

[3] Abt Associates, CSH and Technical Assistance. (2016, August 1). Ending Youth Homelessness: Guidebook Series. Retrieved from HUD Exchange: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5138/ending-youth-homelessness-a-guidebook-series/>. Retrieved from page 2 of Promising Program Models: <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Ending-Youth-Homelessness-Promising-Program-Models.pdf>.

[4] *What are kinship navigator programs?* (2018, 11 26). Retrieved from Casey Family Programs: <https://www.casey.org/what-are-kinship-navigators/>.

[5] Supra note 4.

[6] Supra note 3.

[7] Supra note 3.

[8] HUD Exchange (2021, September 4). Continuum of Care (CoC) Program Eligibility Requirements. Retrieved from Department of Housing and Urban Development: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-program-eligibility-requirements/>.

[9] Supra note 3.

[10] Supra note 3.

[11] Smoot, N. "Youth Homelessness and the Juvenile Justice System: A Roadmap of What to Ask, Offer, and Expect from Referral to Reentry." Guide/Toolkit. Washington D.C.: Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2018 – http://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/map_FINAL_compressed.pdf.

[12] "A Judicial Guide: Identifying and Serving Youth Experiencing Homelessness." Washington D.C.: Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d – <http://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/A%20Judicial%20Guide%20Identifying%20and%20Serving%20Youth%20Experiencing%20Homelessness.pdf>.

[13] National Conference of State Legislatures. Homeless Youth Policy Scan. 21 11 2019. 1 September 2021 – <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/homeless-youth-policy-scan.aspx>.

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The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ) is a nationwide coalition of State Advisory Groups (SAGs), organizations, individuals, youth, and allies dedicated to preventing children and youth from becoming involved in the courts and upholding the highest standards of care when youth are charged with wrongdoing and enter the justice system. CJJ envisions a nation where fewer children are at risk of delinquency; and if they are at risk or involved with the justice system, they and their families receive every possible opportunity to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges® (NCJFCJ), an affiliate of the University of Nevada, Reno since 1969, provides cutting-edge training, wide-ranging technical assistance, and research to help the nation's courts, judges, and staff in their important work. Since its founding in 1937 by a group of judges dedicated to improving the effectiveness of the nation's juvenile courts, the NCJFCJ has pursued a mission to improve courts and systems practice and raise awareness of the core issues that touch the lives of many of our nation's children and families.

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