

LOTUS HOUSE YOUTH PROGRAM

In our Youth Program, unaccompanied and parenting youth and their children find sanctuary, support, education, tools and resources to blossom into who they are meant to be.

Imagine you are 17 or 18 years old and alone, homeless, desperate to finish high school, with no family support and nowhere to turn. Our homeless high school youth know all too well. Nearly all of the unaccompanied, homeless youth at Lotus House have survived severe trauma in their short lives, including abuse, neglect and untimely loss of parents and caretakers, among others. And yet, with the holistic support system of Lotus House and education as their lifelines, they are still full of youthful hopes and dreams of a better future, college, the service or employment and a career.

We know from experience that unaccompanied, homeless female youth, like their older counterparts, struggle to survive by being invisible, making their numbers difficult to count. It is estimated that between 1 and 1.6 million youth in this nation experience homelessness each year, and every night, thousands of youth across the country go to bed without the safety and stability of a home or family. Most high school age youth are referred to Lotus House via the public school system, though some arrive through County homeless outreach teams.

Two of the primary causes of youth homelessness are family breakdown, including being locked/kicked out, abused, and neglected/abandoned; and “systems failure” through which those aging out of foster care, for example, lack critical support and become homeless. Most homeless youth have experienced trauma, both before and during homelessness, including child physical and sexual abuse and neglect, removal from home by child protective services, and harassment or violence due to homelessness, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, among others. Many are fleeing abusive environments.

Homeless youth are particularly vulnerable and face tragic consequences if they do not receive the services and interventions they need. They are at a higher risk for further physical and sexual assault or abuse, physical illness including HIV/AIDS, anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug abuse, suicide, and becoming involved in prostitution. An estimated 5,000 unaccompanied homeless youth die each year as a result of assault, illness or suicide. Adolescent women are among the most vulnerable and medically underserved groups of homeless individuals.

Homeless female youth are at a high risk for early pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV due to poor access to health care, survival sex (trading sex for basic needs such as housing and food), substance abuse and other challenges.



Homeless youth have multiple special needs—such as mental and physical health needs, substance abuse, and lack of self-sufficiency skills and sustainable financial resources—requiring multiple levels of intervention and support. Homelessness, with its instability and associated traumas, often disrupts schooling and makes finishing high school very challenging, even though school is a lifeline for many. (For references for this section, see Footnotes 3-15).

Gender-specific, trauma-informed, resource enriched solutions for young people who lack basic supports such as stable, safe shelter and food, and the care of a parent or guardian are essential. The national *Framework to End Youth Homelessness* calls for a two-prong approach to effectively serve homeless youth, namely settings which emphasize 1) trauma informed care in which youth can heal, and 2) support services that foster positive youth development, such as life skills building and educational and/or vocational advancement. A multi-faceted service and support framework emphasizing education, skill building, trauma resolution, and a safe, supportive environment are at the heart of effective outcomes. A high level of sensitivity to the special needs of homeless female youth and the physical and sexual traumas they have experienced is also essential. These special youth need time to heal, gender-specific, trauma-informed counseling and support services that make healing possible, and the opportunity to build the foundation for a secure future.

Guided by the *Framework to End Youth Homelessness* and *Preventing and Ending Homelessness – A Coordinated Community Response*, the Lotus House Youth Program provides safe, stable housing to youth for the duration of their high school and/or

vocational training within the framework of a trauma-informed, comprehensive and coordinated support system that promotes positive youth development. To address basic needs, youth are provided with clothing, nourishing meals, access to health care, assistance with benefits and other social services, and have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of enrichment activities. Given their unique trauma histories, female youth benefit from gender specific programming to facilitate their healing and development. Evidence based and informed, trauma focused individual and group counseling allow traumatized youth to heal, learn and grow, and build resiliency and greater self-sufficiency for life's challenges. In addition to individual counseling and life coaching, positive youth development is fostered through a wide range of educational supports (such as school uniforms, supplies, transportation assistance, and school activities, such as field trips, proms, and graduation festivities), life skills building, job training and social activities, designed to build a youth's capacity to support herself, build self-esteem and avoid future homelessness. With individualized, multi-faceted support and resources, the Lotus House Youth Program provides essential tools to allow homeless unaccompanied young women to heal, thrive, and achieve their promise of a brighter future.

For young mothers with children ages 0 to 5 and women who are homeless and pregnant, our Children and Families Program is designed to provide a nurturing wrap around support system for both mothers and mothers-to-be and their children, together with the added support of evidence based and informed child therapy, child-parent therapy and parenting education, to ensure these fragile families can look forward to a happy and healthy fresh start to their new lives together.

Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness A Coordinated Community Response

In *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, we set a national goal to prevent and end youth homelessness in 2020. To get there, it will take all of us—government, non-profits, business, and philanthropy—to make sure every community has the capacity to achieve the goal.

https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Youth_Homelessness_Coordinated_Response.pdf