



A part of something: The importance of transitional living programs within a Housing First framework for youth experiencing homelessness



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ABSTRACT

Young people experiencing homelessness face severe threats to their health and well-being and while we know quite a bit about these risks, much less is understood about the usefulness of the services currently being provided to mitigate them. Transitional living programs (TLPs) are one of three core strategies executed by the federal government of the United States to address youth homelessness. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to understand the impact over time of the housing and support services provided by a TLP directly from the perspectives of formerly homeless youth. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 32 young people who exited a TLP located in Chicago, Illinois between 1 and 11 years ago. Participants believed TLPs to be an essential part of our solution to address youth homelessness, identifying themes of family, individual connections, community and preparedness that they believe uniquely qualify TLPs as a developmentally-appropriate program model for youth in times of housing crisis.

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1. Introduction

Research in the area of youth homelessness has concentrated on understanding the population – their needs, their experiences, the risks they face, and the etiology of their homelessness. Although important, this focus has resulted in a knowledge base almost entirely dedicated to understanding the characteristics of homeless youth rather than the service sector's efforts to respond to their needs (Kidd, 2012; Milburn, Rosenthal, & Rotheram-Borus, 2005). The level of imminent danger facing youth in situations of homelessness demands that we begin to understand the impact of services so we are able to direct limited resources to the most efficacious solutions. Global conversations are currently taking place about the most appropriate program models for youth in situations of homelessness (Dworsky, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Pope, 2011). Simultaneously, overwhelming evidence supporting Housing First intervention strategies, predominately scattered-site individual apartment models, is shaping the direction of funding prioritization within the homeless service system as a whole (Goering et al., 2014; Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Transitional living programs (TLPs), a congregate housing model for youth, are currently one of three core strategies executed by the federal government of the United States to address youth homelessness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2014a). As such, it is imperative that we begin to understand if, and how, the services being provided

by TLPs are benefitting young people over time in order to understand if the program model has a place within a Housing First framework for youth.

1.1. The program model

For over 40 years, the primary federal response to youth homelessness in the United States has been the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) which authorizes several programs administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Since its original passage in 1974, RHYA has been reauthorized five times, most recently by the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act in 2008 (P.L. 110-378). Transitional living programs were established during the 1988 reauthorization of RHYA to provide services for older homeless youth ages 16 to 21 who are unable to return home. The purpose of the program is to provide safe, stable living accommodations and a range of supportive services for up to 21 months to help young people develop the skills necessary to become independent (RHYA, 2008, P.L. 110-378, Title III, Part B, Section 322a). Services provided by TLPs include housing, counseling, life skills development, interpersonal skill building, educational advancement, job attainment skills, and mental and physical health care. In FY 2014, Congress authorized 43.65 million dollars to fund 200 transitional living programs across the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2014c, March 14). These programs provide services to over 3300 homeless youth each year and are consistently at capacity with over 1200 youth on waiting lists that continue to grow (DHHS, 2014d, October 14).

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1.2. Research on transitional living programs for homeless youth

Despite the demand for services and the prominent place of TLPs in our nation's plan to address youth homelessness, the effectiveness of the program as a service delivery model has yet to be formally evaluated beyond an understanding of immediate youth outcomes at the time of exit from the program.¹ The New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services explored the perspectives of four TLP service providers with regard to how the program impacts the lives of young people (Bartlett, Copeman, Golin, Miller, & Needle, 2004). Researchers found that each TLP program had its own definition of youth success but all generally included an evaluation of progress while in the program, comparing entry and exit indicators such as: housing status, educational attainment, development of life skills and reduction in substance use.

Giffords, Alonso, and Bell (2007) and Nolan (2006) also conducted case studies of TLPs, investigating how two different programs in New York City are currently providing services and measuring their impact. Giffords et al. (2007) examined outcome data from 44 youth who participated in a TLP program in 2005 at their exit from the program. They found that 93% of youth in the program acquired or continued to practice independent living skills, 91% had attended school, participated in vocational training or were employed over the last quarter, and 87% of youth moved into an appropriate setting for independent living upon discharge from the program. Nolan (2006) collected data from all youth served by a TLP for homeless LGBT youth from 2000 to 2005 ($N = 40$). Success was determined by the attainment of safe housing at exit as well as by progress made in the area of education. Nolan found that 77% of youth exited to a safe living situation, and 43% increased their level of education by obtaining a GED or attending a semester of college. Although both studies found promising support for the use of the TLP model for homeless youth, like the programs in New England examined by Bartlett et al. (2004), both studies lack an understanding of outcomes for youth beyond exit from the program.

There has been only one study in the United States to investigate outcomes of TLP services for youth following their exit from housing. Rashid (2004) found preliminary, descriptive evidence that TLPs may be a useful program model in an analysis of 23 youth in Northern California who participated in transitional living services following experiences of homelessness after leaving foster care. While Rashid's findings are based on a small, non-random sample, 87% of young people located at six months after their exit from the program had remained in permanent, stable housing.

1.3. Housing First

Housing First is an intervention approach to working with people in situations of homelessness that has arguably the most solid research base of any homelessness intervention currently being implemented (Goering et al., 2014; Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). It is defined by three primary characteristics: (1) moving people immediately into housing; (2) eliminating any preconditions for that housing as they relate to sobriety and compliance with mental health treatment; and (3) providing a range of supports for individuals once they are housed to help them sustain housing for the long-term. The foundation of Housing First is "the underlying principle that...people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed" (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013, p. 12). It is logical, practical, cost-effective and grounded in the belief that housing is a basic human right.

Housing First interventions are predominately designed as scattered site apartment programs where individuals are placed directly into their own apartment while they receive the supports they need to obtain stability. With strong evidence of its effectiveness, Housing First programs

have rightfully become increasingly prevalent across the United States, more and more taking the place of emergency shelter and transitional (or interim) housing models (Da Costa Nunez, Adams, & Simonsen-Meehan, 2011). This movement toward Housing First, specifically as it is largely viewed as a scattered-site individual apartment model, further amplifies our need to understand if there is a place for transitional living programs, a congregate-housing model, in our response to youth homelessness. While young people in situations of homelessness are not a monolithic group and certainly have varied needs, their experiences leading up to and during periods of housing instability tend to be much different than older adults and families. Their reasons for homelessness, the types of harm they experience and the complex developmental transition of adolescence, require services that are prepared to respond accordingly (Gaetz, 2014).

1.4. Positive youth development

Positive youth development is an ecological, asset-based approach to social work practice that promotes healthy adolescent development through supportive, nurturing environments and services designed to foster meaningful connections to others and community (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Youth development research demonstrates that services that enhance the positive internal characteristics of young people such as social competencies as well as external assets such as positive support, enhance the potential for young people to not just survive the transition to adulthood, but to thrive (Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 2004; Wilson-Simons, 2007). To this end, key features of PYD interventions include: consistent emotional and moral support; opportunities to develop healthy and supportive relationships and to contribute to the larger community; the acquisition of coping strategies and other protective factors; opportunities for skill-building and mastery; the development of personal autonomy; and the importance of having the voices of young people heard and valued (Hamilton et al., 2004). Positive youth development is widely supported as an effective practice approach with youth experiencing homelessness (Heinze, Hernandez-Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010) and, as such, all federally-funded TLP programs are currently required to implement the model.

1.5. The current study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived utility of TLPs as a housing model for youth experiencing homelessness. There is a range of supportive housing models for youth facing housing instability (Dworsky, 2010; Gaetz, 2014; Pope, 2011). While there is evidence indicating that principles of Housing First and positive youth development should be incorporated into our solutions to youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014), there is little empirical knowledge about the efficacy of any particular model. A lack of research on the effectiveness of TLPs for youth places them at risk for being phased out and/or underfunded in favor of scattered site, permanent supportive housing models that have been shown to be effective with families and adults.

This current gap in our understanding around the impact of particular housing models makes the perspective of young people who have participated in housing services highly valuable when seeking to understand what program designs and services are most useful. Further, Gilgun and Abrams (2002) warn that the voices of disenfranchised populations "are routinely suppressed within the many arenas in which their fates are debated and shaped" (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002, p. 42). As such, qualitative research methods were utilized in this study to propel the perspectives of youth who have experienced homelessness to the center of the discussion. A phenomenological approach facilitated the two-fold purpose of this study: first, to understand the experiences of participants since leaving TLPs; and, second, to explore how participants make sense of those experiences and how they perceive any relation to the services they received while in the TLP.

¹ DHHS is currently conducting a study measuring TLP outcomes at 12 and 18 months, results expected in 2016 (DHHS, 2014b, August 12).

The findings presented here are the results of the second aim of this research — the perspective of participants as to the perceived impact of TLP services (see Holt Schneider, in press for findings related to the specific experiences of participants since leaving the TLP). For the purposes of this study, the term *perceived impact* is used to refer to a participant's personal awareness, identification and interpretation of the outcome/s of the services they received during their time living in a TLP.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted with young people who previously resided at a TLP operated by a non-profit agency serving homeless youth in Chicago, Illinois. The organization was one of the first agencies in the country to operate a TLP following the genesis of the program model in the 1988 reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and the program has been at capacity (currently 24 beds) ever since. The TLP serves youth who are homeless throughout the city, however an overwhelming majority originates from communities on Chicago's south and west sides from neighborhoods often characterized by high poverty rates, gang violence and substandard housing.

A purposive sample was selected to represent a range of young people who participated in the program from 2003 to 2013. This time period was selected as the agency generally destroys records after ten years, precluding verification of program involvement for years before 2003, and 2013 was selected to ensure participants had been out of the TLP for at least one year. Maximum variation sampling is a type of purposive sampling that “aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation” (Patton, 1990, p. 172). It is based upon the logic that any commonalities that emerge from a heterogeneous sample are of “particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (p. 172). To this end, a maximum variation sampling strategy was used to select eligible participants who reflected a range of diverse individual characteristics of youth served by the TLP. These characteristics included variation in participant ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, nature of exit from the TLP, time elapsed since leaving the TLP and length of time in the TLP. Recruitment continued until it was determined through ongoing data analysis that the point of theoretical saturation had been reached after interviews with 32 participants.

Participants included 19 females (59%) and 13 males (41%) (one male-identified participant is transgender) and ranged in age from 20 to 32 years old ($M = 26$). Gender, sexual identity and ethnic identities of the sample closely mirror those of the selected study site (see Table 1). Twenty-one participants identified as heterosexual (66%), three as lesbian (9%), four gay (12.5%) and four identified as bisexual (12.5%). Twenty-eight participants self-identified their ethnicity as African American (88%), two as African American and Latino (6%), one

as European American (3%), and one as Latino (3%). Length of stay in the program ranged from 61 to 659 days ($M = 250$ days) and at least one participant from each year from 2003 to 2013 was represented in the sample. Participants experienced a range of reasons for exit from the program as well as variation in exit destinations. Details of each participant's demographics and program characteristics can be found in Table 2.

2.2. Recruitment

A range of recruitment methods were utilized in order to maximize variation in the sampling and to reach youth who may have been traditionally more difficult to find. In the first stage of recruitment, the principal investigator worked directly with the director of outreach, prevention and aftercare at the program site to identify initial participants who may be eligible and are still in contact with the program according to the sampling strategy outlined in Section 2.1. A waiver of consent (for recruitment purposes only) from the institutional review board was obtained for youth who had previously consented to agency follow-up (consent for follow-up is typically completed with all youth during their exit from the program). The agency provided the most recent contact information they had on file for each potential participant selected, and they were then contacted directly via phone, email or both with information about how to participate in the study. Five participants were contacted through this strategy of which two participants were enrolled.

Concurrently, as staff conducted routine follow-up efforts with youth for the agency's own evaluation purposes or met with young people for aftercare services, they informed individuals who exited the program at least one year prior, of the opportunity to participate in the study and provided information for how to contact the principal investigator should they be interested. Additionally, study flyers were posted in community areas of the transitional living program and drop-in center program sites as well as several staff offices throughout both facilities. Five participants contacted the principal investigator to express interest in the study following a phone call or meeting with a current staff member of the agency, and one called after seeing a program flyer; all six were subsequently enrolled.

The second stage of recruitment involved participant snowball sampling, which began immediately following recruitment of the first participant in order to ensure that youth who have no current connection to the program or former staff were adequately represented in the study sample. It was essential to have a sample that included young people who were no longer in contact with the program, as this could have potentially been both an indicator of greater stability as well as of poorer outcomes. Lack of contact with the program could also indicate a negative experience while in the TLP, which was a vital perspective in order to answer the identified research questions confidently. In this stage of recruitment, study participants as well as key informants that maintain contact with previous TLP residents (e.g. current and former staff) were asked to inform potential participants of the

Table 1
TLP youth demographics.

Fiscal year	Total # served	Male	Female	Afr Amer	Euro Amer	Latino	Other	LGBT
FY 04	35	17	18	28	4	2	1	No data available for these years
FY 05	42	20	22	38	3	0	1	
FY 06	44	22	22	42	0	0	2	
FY 07	49	26	23	46	0	2	1	
FY 08	53	24	29	47	1	3	2	
FY 09	51	25	26	43	3	3	2	
FY 10	52	31	21	40	5	5	2	13
FY 11	65	36	29	54	3	6	2	16
FY 12	58	26	32	52	0	3	3	13
FY 13	58	29	29	47	2	3	6	10
Total #	507	256	251	437	21	27	22	52
Total %		50.5%	49.5%	86.2%	4.1%	5.3%	4.3%	22.0%

Table 2
Participant characteristics.^a

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethni	Sex Or	Nights	Exit Yr	Exit reason	Exit destination
Omillie	20	M	AA	H	125	2012	Physical altercation	Emer shelter
					100	2013	Physical altercation	Brother
Cierra	21	F	AA	H	236	2012	Pregnancy	Father
Rupert	21	M	AA	H	516	2011	Self-discharge	Apt w/brother
Chunky Chip	22	F	AA	L	474	2011	Rule violations	Friend
Anna	22	F	AA	H	61	2011	Altercat w/weapon	Friend
Ryan	22	M	AA	H	659	2010	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Zamiya	22	F	AA	H	65	2009	Drug paraphernalia	Emer shelter
Melissa	23	F	AA	B	453	2011	Rule violations	Partner's mother
					114	2011	Rule violations	Mom
					70	2011	Self discharge	Partner
Eshawn	23	M	AA	G	117	2009	Rule violations	Friend
					95	2010	Drug paraphernalia	Friend
					90	2011	Self-discharge	Partner (IPV)
Jacob	23	M	AA	H	499	2011	Time limit	Grandmother
Rose	23	F	AA	H	432	2010	Did not return	Partner (IPV)
					18	2011	Did not return	Partner (IPV)
					98	2010	Alcohol on prop	Son's mother
Chris Kringle	23	M	AA	H	151	2011	Rule violations	Son's mother
					490	2010	Age limit	Aunt
Kennedy	24	M	AA	H	490	2010	Age limit	Aunt
Diana	24	F	AA	H	454	2011	Pregnancy	Other program
Chi Villa	24	M	AA	H	616	2009	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Renee	25	F	AA	H	494	2008	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Selena	25	F	AA	B	123	2009	Drug paraphernalia	Other program
					153	2009	Rule violations	Mother
Esmeralda	26	F	AA/L	H	363	2008	Independent living	Subsidized apt
M.G.	26	F	AA	L	220	2007	Rule violations	Friend
Marcus	28	M	AA	G	260	2006	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Austin	28	F	AA	G	329	2004	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Pizza	28	F	AA	H	264	2005	Pregnancy	Other program
Emily	29	F	EA	H	196	2004	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Stephanie	29	F	AA	B	120	2004	Rule violations	Aunt
					154	2005	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Aaron	29	M (T)	AA	H	168	2003	Rule violations	Mother
					97	2005	Drugs on property	Friend
Toni	29	F	AA	B	526	2006	Age limit	Subsidized apt
Sophia	29	F	AA	H	254	2005	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Free Spirit	30	F	AA	H	215	2005	Self discharge	Mother
Timothy	31	M	AA	H	355	2005	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Lukes	31	M	L	G	215	2004	Self discharge	Sister
Blythe	32	F	AA/L	L	87	2002	Self discharge	Partner
					84	2003	Self discharge	Partner
					66	2003	Independent living	Subsidized apt
Justin	32	M	AA	H	332	2003	Independent living	Subsidized apt

^a If youth had multiple stays in the program, each one is listed separately.

study and provide contact information should they be interested in learning more. Individuals reaching out to their contacts were provided a study flyer to distribute and/or a script developed to guide any telephone contact. Youth and staff reached out to their networks in person, via telephone and email, and also by messaging former TLP residents they were “friends” with on Facebook. Eighteen participants were enrolled in the study as a result of this phase of sampling: eleven were recruited by other youth (a combination of text, Facebook and in-person visits) and seven were recruited by former staff members of the TLP (five through Facebook, one by telephone and one by a serendipitous encounter crossing the street between a former staff member who had been informed of the study and a youth who been in the program ten years ago).

In an effort to ensure that the sample included young people who had no current connections to other participants and/or TLP staff members, characteristics still needed to be represented in order to properly maximize the variation of the sample were identified and “cold” messages were sent through Facebook to potential participants who met these criteria. Four youth were enrolled through this strategy. Two additional youth were enrolled when the principal investigator was visiting the TLP for a purpose unrelated to the study and encountered them while in the facility.

In total, 42 individuals were contacted to participate in the study and 32 were enrolled as outlined above. Four individuals expressed interest

in participating in the study upon initial contact; however, they did not respond to several messages following this initial contact. Five other potential participants were contacted via email, telephone and/or Facebook, and did not reply, which was interpreted as the participants either not being interested and/or that the contact information was incorrect. Only one young person recruited for the study explicitly declined, and she reported this to be a result of a busy schedule.

2.3. Data collection

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 32 participants. In-person interviews were conducted with 27 participants living in Illinois and 5 telephone interviews were conducted with participants currently living out of state. In person interviews took place in a variety of settings as participants were encouraged to select a location most convenient for them and included participants' homes, coffee shops, restaurants and the study site's drop in center. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the questions asked of youth in this study were intentionally broad and attempted to elicit as much information on the study topic as possible from each participant (Giorgi, 1997). They were written with the intention of stimulating responses from participants that would describe their experiences since leaving a TLP as well as the way they attach meaning to those experiences. The interview guide was developed in consultation with a formerly

homeless youth who previously participated in a TLP program (see Appendix A). This young person was recruited by the principal investigator on a visit to the study site when he was there participating in aftercare services. He reviewed an initial draft of the interview guide and then made suggestions related to the content and wording of questions in order to increase the guide's overall relevance for youth and therefore usefulness for the study. All participants received \$20 cash incentive upon completion of their interview as compensation for their time and expertise.

In addition to interviews, data related to participants' characteristics, stay in the program, and selected outcome indicators were obtained through the completion of a brief questionnaire directly following each interview. Participant characteristic and program data was used to both describe the sample (see Table 2) and to ensure that the sample was generally reflective of the range of young people who participate in the program (see Table 1). Data collected was limited to the following: gender, ethnicity, date of birth, sexual orientation, length of stay in the program, date of exit from the program, reason for exit from the program and types of services received. In addition, participants were also asked for their consent to review their TLP case files for the purpose of the verification of the above information only. This was necessary to confirm details a participant might forget over time such as date of exit from the program, length of stay, and services received. The questionnaire completed by participants also included items related to participant outcomes since leaving the program and included their current housing, income, education, health and parenting status.

2.4. Data analysis

All data from participant questionnaires and case files were assigned a participant ID and entered into a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel, a computer software spreadsheet application. All qualitative interview data were transferred to digital audio files directly following each interview and then deleted from the digital audio recorder. Each of these audio files was saved in a file named with their corresponding participant ID. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and then reviewed in its entirety multiple times in order to ensure accuracy. Participants were given a pseudonym of their choosing, and any other names or information that could feasibly jeopardize their confidentiality was eliminated from the transcript (the name of the specific program was changed to "the TLP" and names of other TLP participants are represented by first initial only). Once transcribed and de-identified, interviews were imported into a computer-based qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA (Version 11), in order to manage, sort and code the data.

The systematic steps for transcendental phenomenological analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) guided this investigation. In the first phase of data analysis each interview transcript was read in its entirety in order to get a global sense of the whole interview. Next, significant statements were identified and labeled with codes classifying the concepts being described. The identified significant statements and codes were clustered into thematic categories that represented shared meanings within and across participants. Significant statements were then used to inform the creation of textural descriptions of each theme, detailing what each one tells us about *what* participants have experienced since leaving a TLP as well as structural descriptions which outlined *how* those events have been experienced. Finally, individual descriptions for participants were combined into composite descriptions that communicated the essence of the experience for the whole.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, two methods of triangulation were used. The first was the purposive sampling of a range of participants with diverse characteristics, which allows for "individual viewpoints and experiences to be verified against others" (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). This was achieved through the use of a maximum-variation sampling strategy described in Section 2.1. The second method of triangulation was through the use of an additional coder. This

additional coder was a social work doctoral candidate and researcher in the area of services for transition-aged youth with extensive experience in qualitative coding and training in human subjects protections. Three participants were randomly selected and the second coder was provided with over 80 pages of transcripts from these interviews. A comparison of independent initial codes revealed a high-level of consensus regarding the major themes present in the data. There were no significant areas of incongruence to resolve; however, several codes provided by the additional coder helped to further refine the understanding of emerging themes.

3. Findings

The results presented here are a synthesis of the central themes participants discussed directly related to the perceived utility of TLPs as a housing model for youth experiencing homelessness. The findings are presented through the integration of composite textural and structural descriptions developed through the phenomenological analyses described in Section 2.4 and are organized into the following four themes: family, individual connections, community and preparedness.

3.1. Finding family

The first theme participants related to the perceived utility of TLPs as a housing model for youth was the sense of family that emerged within the relationships built during their time in the program.

If they didn't have a family to begin with that group will be their family... (The TLP) is a stepping-stone for you to either go to your own apartment or to go to somewhere else yourself, you know, but while you're here under this roof, we are a family. We look out for each other. It's just like a football team. If we all don't work together we're not going to make it to the Super Bowl. And your goal right now is to make it to the Super Bowl. If you want to get up to the Super Bowl, you need the rest of your family to get to where you're going."

[(Eshawn, 23)]

Most participants had complicated relationships with their childhood caretakers (which included biological parents, a range of relative and non-relative care givers, and staff of child welfare group homes) and siblings. They had experienced rejection, disappointment, neglect and often violence at the hands of their families, but they also continued to hold firmly onto the idea that the concept of family meant something. In particular, family meant that it was okay to not always get along but implied a sense of longevity and sturdiness to relationships built within the program:

I think that was the best part, having people that you can – they can relate to you. I mean only if they like you if you don't, but at the end of the day we were all a family. Like and we was all cool, and the next week we still didn't like each other but we were a family. That's how family is. Sometimes you don't like them. You don't have to like them but you love them.

[(Selena, 25)]

Peers and staff from the TLP filled traditional familial roles in ways that biological family could not. Rupert makes the distinction between his biological family and the idealized version of what familial roles should be. He labels his two closest friends in the program as his brothers and describes how they mutually care for one another financially and how K, three years older than Rupert, functioned as a surrogate parent, teaching him and guiding him in a way that his biological (and step) parents had not.

I actually, you know, K taught me a lot, man. That's why he's like family to me. That's why it's a lot of people – like J's my brother,

too. Like J is family to me. You know what I'm saying? It's just like we kind of, that's my homies. You know what I'm saying? Anytime I get some money, I'll come over his house and I'll just give him some money because that is love. You know what I'm saying? While he's doing stuff for me my own momma ain't doing for me. You know what I'm saying? He's told me stuff, my mother never told me. And I ain't never had a father. You know, my stepfather was abusive. You know what I'm saying? He wasn't really nothing. K taught me a lot. Like I don't think I would've been the same person if it wasn't for that dude, man... I just loved that basically we was family.

[(Rupert, 21)]

The formation of familial roles while in the program was a common experience for participants and seemed to be particularly meaningful for youth who had been let down by their family of origin. Ryan (age 22) had been financially victimized by his mother and brothers throughout most of his life. He is the primary caretaker in his family and continues to remain loyal despite recent incidents that include his mother stealing his fiancé's engagement ring, his brother stealing his savings hidden in his room, and his brothers causing him to be evicted from his apartment because they initiated frequent disturbances and refused to heed Ryan's pleas for them to leave: "I loved my brothers so much. I gave them so many chances to help me out and nobody didn't come through." One might think that Ryan's concept of family would be impacted negatively by these experiences of constant victimization; however, when Ryan was asked what he would do if he were to open his own TLP for youth experiencing homelessness, he responded:

It would be like a family. (The TLP) was like a family. We should have a family night when they would take us out to movies and stuff but it would be more than a movie, movies, games, all that, just talk and stuff, just have fun.

Ryan was then asked what made the TLP feel like a family:

Having fun. I mean because I can tell, just talking to K and S about anything. Also, we would be real, sometimes we would play but in serious mode, we would talk. We talked. We had fun together but like K and S were like my brothers, like better than my brothers. They wouldn't do what my brothers did.

In addition to labeling relationships built in the TLP as familial, participants described the program itself as taking on traditional parental roles, including discussion of how the program "raised them."

Okay, I'd say life is different. I have matured now, a lot of places because, you know, (the TLP) practically raised me. I was there when I was so young and I had to go through so many trials and tribulations there.

[(Zamiya, 22)]

3.2. Individual connections

The second central theme related to the perceived usefulness of their time in the TLP centered on the acquisition of the individual relationships built with both peers and staff. These relationships, beyond fulfilling familial positions youth were missing as discussed in Section 3.1, provided a general place of understanding, support and companionship.

3.2.1. Individual relationships with peers

One hundred percent of the sample identified the relationships they developed while in the TLP as the most beneficial aspect of the program.

The best time, it was more than one time for me. Just knowing like the people that lived in the house, they had each other's back no

matter if we went through hell and back, we were still there for each other. Like we were each other's support system. That's what I loved. If we couldn't go to the staff, we got each other. Because we all knew what it was like to be in that situation.

[(Aaron, 29)]

When asked if they believed if their lives would be any different if the TLP did not exist, participants consistently commented on the relationships built with other young people; in fact they discussed these relationships more than any other subject during their interviews: "If I never went to (the TLP) I would've never met the good friends that I met, they're real supportive. I think about that every day" (Cierra, 21).

3.2.2. Increased empathy

Participants described feeling a unique bond with other youth in the program as a result of shared experiences. They also believed that knowledge of the challenges facing some of their peers not only provided a safe haven to share their own stories but also helped them to become more understanding and empathetic.

I think it shaped me, like because everybody is struggling in something in their life, and I think that when you hear other people's stories, then you're like, "Wow, I'm glad I never had to go through that. I'm glad I never had to experience that, and my life is not that bad," you know what I mean? Like, there are people who have literally no one, and I think (the TLP) gave them that someone that they always needed.

[(Stephanie, 29)]

3.2.3. Unlikely friendships and the value of diversity

Participants noted that connections with peers in the program often formed quickly and, to their surprise at times, with individuals they felt as though they might not have normally befriended. Eshawn, a gay man, talked about a few of the close connections he was surprised to have built with heterosexual male peers:

That's what I liked about (the TLP) too. I love the diversity. There were so many different people put together...You never would've expected that me and K would be cool because "Eshawn? Eshawn, I don't be messin with" and we would chill, no disrespect, no, none of that and you would've never expected that. Half of the dudes at (the TLP) I wouldn't have expected to get along with.

[(Eshawn, 23)]

Participants appreciated the opportunity to live with people who understood the challenges they were facing but who at the same time were also different. They saw it as an opportunity to learn and to grow:

Coming from how I was raised and everything like that, I just assumed that everybody was raised that way, and everybody mama told them that, and everybody daddy told them that, until I got to actually meet people and see different backgrounds because I mean I wasn't exposed to some of the stuff that some of those other people were exposed to, or living like that, or just different backgrounds. And that's what makes the world a whole.

[(Sophia, 29)]

3.2.4. Learning to get along

While relationships with other youth were highly important, participants were clear that these bonds were not universal to all youth in the program. In fact, most participants discussed getting along with other youth as also one of the main challenges they faced when living in the

TLP: “The very same that was the best thing was the hardest thing: all of the people. Different attitudes, different personalities. You're not going to always click with everyone who is there” (Renee, 25). Participants described how living with so many different people was difficult at times but how it taught them skills they have found useful in subsequent living environments and workplaces:

(The TLP) taught me a lot how to deal with people too, because before I could not deal with people...I think I got a thicker skin from there. I'm able to deal with people now

[(Rupert, 21)]

3.2.5. Individual relationships with staff

Individual relationships built with staff members were also viewed as an important aspect of their time in the program. Participants recognized the critical developmental stage they were at during their time in the TLP and felt that some of the most beneficial services delivered centered on providing guidance, instilling values and nurturing the adults they were becoming. Like most adolescents, they made mistakes. They broke rules. They had difficulty controlling their impulses and planning ahead. Participants appreciated the relationships they built with certain staff members in relation to how they were supported during these times. They described certain staff members with familial roles, such as parents and siblings, but they also frequently referred to them as close friends, mentors and role models. Positive relationships with staff were perceived to have a profound impact on participants' self-esteem, mental health, personal development and attainment of future goals.

(Staff member) kept me laughing and I kept (her) laughing. But she also kept pushing me as well, because she knew that I had a lot of potential, so she kept trying to push me. They seen that I had a lot of it, so they wanted me to keep going further and further and further, and to not try to revert back to all the old stuff I've went through...Basically, they wasn't really counselors to me...yeah, they was just really close friends that I could spill my whole heart and guts out to.

[(Jacob, 23)]

Just as with their peers, however, participants were clear that not all staff members were perceived as helpful; in fact, several were identified as causing harm. Additionally, it is important to note that participants identified high turnover rates among staff to be a difficult aspect of living in the TLP. Participants faced an inordinate amount of loss in their lives as a result of homelessness: their actual homes, of course, but with it often also their families, schools, friends and neighborhoods. The experience of living in a TLP was one where they were asked to trust and confide in a group of professionals who they, too, would eventually lose. This situation created conflict for participants as they decided how and when to build relationships with staff.

The other part to that, my second biggest problem being, okay you do find this connection with someone on staff. The consistency was horrible, the turn around was horrible, and I don't think that you as a staff member, I don't think it's fair to take a job with kids who really just need stability if you're not gonna be there for two years or more. If you can't make a commitment for minimum of two years just find somewhere else to work. You could still even work in human services it just shouldn't be at a group home. Because pretty much all we've been taught — almost the only message that we have been taught at that point in our lives is don't trust anyone because as soon as you start to trust them they're gonna leave and then that's proven in the place that's supposed to pick you up off your feet. And then that just makes you more angry.

So I would fix that. I would say that people need to make a commitment for two years.

[(Blythe, 32)]

3.3. Community

The third theme distinct from, but related to, the first two themes of family and individual connections, was the sense of community experienced from the program as a whole.

3.3.1. Surrounded by others

The TLP housed between 20 and 24 youth depending on which building participants lived in (the program moved facilities in 2009), along with anywhere from 2 to 15 staff members depending on the time of day. This arrangement resulted in consistent access to someone who would be available to listen, motivate, support, and surround youth when they reported they would have otherwise felt alone. Marcus graduated from the TLP into the agency's independent living program where he was provided with his own apartment. He describes the difference between the two programs as such:

I liked (the TLP) more than I liked (the independent living program). Just the life skills and the knowledge of the people and the staff. Just being around people all the time who worked in different fields and who could help you with different things. Anything that I needed or thought about, it was always somebody there that I can ask — what they think about it? Or what to do about something? Always somebody. I had the security of that and it was safe and comfortable...It was just that when something happened, I would have 15 people there to support me, to help me right there versus me on my own having to call someone or email and wait for a response. I never had to worry about that. You don't just need shelter, you need support.

[(Marcus, 28)]

Participants believed that having an environment where you are surrounded by others, even if they didn't know them well, makes an important, and at times life saving, difference. They shared stories of struggling with mental health and substance use and being unsure if they would have made it through if staff members and peers had not been right there in the next room to support them. Free Spirit recalled a story of running into a peer from the TLP approximately eight years after they had both left the program where she learned that she had prevented her from engaging in cutting:

This was two years ago with her husband and her two kids. She instantly hugged me and started crying because I stopped her from cutting herself. I had no idea I did that. She said, “Your bluntness and your rudeness and spiciness by the way.” I was like, “Wow.” She was like, it made sense to me because she was cutting herself one day and I remember sitting on the back at the TLP stairs and she was talking about it crying. I didn't really know her at that point, but my soul was like yelling at me, like “you go talk to her. You talk to her now.”

[(Free Spirit, 30)]

3.3.2. Everyday rituals

When participants discussed the feeling of community within the program, they were asked where it came from and their responses frequently centered on everyday rituals that for some would not seem to be so remarkable: “The weekends, getting up in the mornings and cooking breakfast. Yeah, like that” (Chris Kringle, 23). Melissa spoke about the power of just having someone wish you good morning:

Oh, man. It was just like, if I didn't have the motivation — even just getting up, with the staff saying, “Good morning,” smiling, things like that. Things like that motivated me, because before I came to TLP I

was a loner and I didn't talk to anybody. You know, when you only talk to yourself in your head. Yeah. I'm just grateful. I'm definitely grateful for (the TLP). During the time that I was there, they helped me out a lot. I don't know. I've always been motivated to do things, but (the TLP) really, really, like you know, it just made me see – get back to who I was before I went through the homelessness.

[(Melissa, 23)]

For some participants, the TLP was their first experience of being able to go home to others that cared about their wellbeing. This was true for Rupert who shared what life was like for him before going to the TLP and how he wishes today that he could return:

I see people be like damn, they so friendly. They go to Catholic School. Their mother's love them. They probably got everything when they get home, man. That shit's crazy, man. I didn't go home to nothing. You know what I'm saying? I ain't gonna go home to nothing. Ain't nobody gonna pay attention to me. Nobody gonna talk to me...I wish I could just go back in time to when I was in there. I still would if I could, bro. Yeah, if I still could, I would go back. I wouldn't be depressed or nothing, bro, but I would come back because it's just incredible, man. Like I think that's energy, man. That helped a lot because – because I learned so much from the kids in there, from the staff. I learned from everyone.

[(Rupert, 21)]

Thirteen participants (41% of the sample) spontaneously mentioned at some point during their interview they would go back to the program if they were eligible. They missed the tangible support, but they also missed the sense of community and the consistent emotional support and validation that accompanied it, or as Rupert called it, the “energy.” Participants recalled times spent together as a community with a notable fondness and voiced that more opportunities for this association, such as family dinners, game nights and holiday celebrations, should be incorporated into the TLP whenever possible.

3.3.3. Communal spaces

The importance of a sense of community was also reflected in participant responses to the interview question asking them to design their own TLP. These descriptions, although highly nuanced and unique to each individual, universally included a balance of private and community space. Youth incorporated shared dining, cooking, living and learning spaces into their program designs. They envisioned game rooms and outdoor areas where they could gather and simply be together: “Yeah, that was the good part; a lot of people to help out, hang out. More people get to know each other and people could do a lot of stuff together” (Jacob, 23). While most participants felt it was important to have private bedrooms, a few thought having one roommate when you first arrive was useful to help acclimate new youth to the program and provide immediate companionship as youth exit a stressful experience into an entirely new environment.

See, this is why I would do shared: So you could – I don't know – so you could meet that person, so you could experience their life, and so you could get to know other people. And I feel like you're getting something that you would never get someplace else, that quality of care, somebody who clearly cares about you, someone who you could trust. Like, I feel like living at (the TLP), we all grew to like kind of know everybody, trust people. We didn't just talk to our YDS1s (staff position). We talked to everybody about anything that was going on in our lives, our roommate; if it wasn't our roommate, the person across the hall, down the hall, on the other side, whatever. Like, and I feel like it should still be like that. I feel like you should live

with someone to kind of see how stuff goes, because you're never gonna always live by yourself.

[(Stephanie, 29)]

3.4. Preparedness

The fourth theme participants discussed in relation to their perceived utility of the TLP housing model centered on their current perspective that at the time of entering services they were not prepared to be on their own.

3.4.1. Not ready

During their interviews, participants shared numerous stories of their own unsuccessful attempts of maintaining independent housing as well as observing friends and family members lose their housing for similar reasons. Participants described how they were drawn to the freedom of having their own apartment but consistently reported that at the time they were ill-equipped to sustain it.

People are not ready. They are not ready, because they're thinking, “I just want my own space to get away from people,” but people don't really know like everything that it takes to keep that up and maintain it, and they don't appreciate it. I feel like when you go through all of that, with living there and having those rules and learning those things that are happening like in the little courses that we have, and meetings, it helps prepare you to live on your own, and it makes you appreciate it. Like, people don't do it now. Like, people work these jobs and save up this money, and they're like, “I'm getting my own place.” They get their own place, and they're in their own place for like three months, and they're evicted, and they're back living with somebody, because they just saw, “I want my own place.” They didn't see, “I'm gonna have to pay this bill, pay this bill, clean up this, go to the store, do this by myself, no help.” They weren't prepared. They just saw “my own place.” They didn't see the other stuff that comes with it.

(Stephanie, 29)

In addition to not being financially prepared and lacking skills related to maintaining apartments independently, participants discussed the challenges of trying to help others while they were still struggling to achieve their own stability:

A year, a year and then I let stuff get out of hand like money and people coming and staying with me, helping other people out and not paying like the rent and stuff. I had lost the one job but I got another one. Just trying to do what I wasn't supposed to have been doing. I'm always trying to help people out. After I lost my apartment, everybody else skedaddled and then, after that, I ended up moving in with my cousin.

[(Toni, 29)]

3.4.2. Program structure

Participants believed an important aspect of a TLP housing model related to preparation was the rules and responsibilities they had while in the program. For this sample of youth, these included policies such as wake-up times, curfew, assigned chores and mandatory school enrollment for all youth without a high school diploma or equivalent.

Even though I didn't find my way home in time a lot of the times (laughter), I felt like it was great because with programs like that you just don't want it to become storage for most of the people...Getting up at a certain time I feel like is awesome. It preps people for work. It preps people for school, things like

that. It just shows people responsibility...so yeah, I felt like it was pretty awesome.

[(Melissa, 23)]

Participants also highlighted the importance of the program structure as it related to their mental health.

Yeah, you need to get up and not just lay in the bed because if I was given the choice most of the days at TLP I would have chosen to stay in the bed. I would not have gotten anything done. I would seriously have slept the whole day away and end up waking up later on at night... That stress that you're putting on yourself and keep it all locked in, you could be letting that be your job. You could be using that energy for something else, like to take your walk for the day for something, or anything other than trying to keep to yourself... You know if (the TLP) has this kind of setting, this home setting like I said, what the family does is installed in you. It's going to show off on that teen.

[(Eshawn, 23)]

Every one of the participants expressed the importance of at least some level of structure and only two participants thought the level of structure they experienced in the program should be minimized. Participants believed that preparation for "the real world" was a responsibility of the program in the same manner it is for parents. It was often the sole location where the opportunity to obtain the skills required to successfully transition into adulthood was available to them. Blythe, now 32 years old, talked about how not having these expectations when you are younger impacts your future success:

One of the things I love the most about being an adult is that there is so much freedom involved. If I want to eat ice cream for breakfast, I can eat ice cream for breakfast. If I don't want to pay rent, I don't have to pay rent, but guess what? There is a consequence to every action. If I eat ice cream for breakfast my stomach's gonna hurt all day and if I don't pay rent, I don't get to live here anymore. Without having those expectations placed in front of you it's kind of shocking and alarming when the real world expects you to hold yourself up to a certain standard and you don't and you get knocked down a peg because you feel like you put forth all of this work and didn't get much out of it.

[(Blythe, 32)]

3.4.3. Time for transition

As a result of experiences of struggling when in their own apartments, participants believed it was important for young people to gradually transition into being on their own and saw the TLP as performing this function.

What people are failing to realize is the only reason why you guys were effective is because you guys were there on the daily to constantly remind me, "M.G., this is important. Hey, life skills. Hey this, hey that." I mean it's around the clock and then you have 24/7 support. A lot of the overnight staff we would have talks and they would reinforce positive energy. 24/7 you know, having someone to talk to. Yeah, you can take away from this transitional living when everyone's living together and do it on an independent basis with (independent living program) but then I would have to come meet with you for maybe an hour a week. You're not going to drive anything in my head in an hour a week for me to be ready for (independent living). You learn from interacting with other individuals. (M.G., 26)

In addition to the TLP, the study site operated an independent living program that participants frequently referenced as a comparison when discussing what they believed to be the unique value of TLPs. The

independent living program provided subsidized, scattered-site individual apartments for youth for up to two years. All but two participants (94%) did not believe it was effective for young people experiencing homelessness to move directly into their own apartment, even when that apartment was fully subsidized. Participants felt the TLP provided a necessary bridge to independent living.

As far as when you're at (the TLP), it teaches you how to deal with stuff in (independent living program) as far as budgeting your money, as far as the life skills. We used to help (staff person) with the food pantry and cooking and all of that stuff, so you definitely need that step one before you go to step two (independent living program), in order to make it to step three which is ultimately being on your own without all that. So you can't start at two and then go to three.

[(Sophia, 29)]

Participants agreed that young people enter the TLP with a wide range of experiences, skill sets and readiness for self-sufficiency. As such, while they believed the TLP to be an important first step for all youth exiting homelessness, they thought it was appropriate for programs to make individual determinations on when youth were ready to transition to independent living based on observed competencies.

3.4.4. Emotional support

In addition to the time and services dedicated to building and practicing the practical skills for living on their own, participants also highlighted the importance of a TLP's holistic approach to that preparation in particular when it came to providing tools to address their mental health needs. Participants identified in their interviews what has been well documented in the research – that young people experiencing homelessness were not only in housing crisis but had often experienced significant trauma (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). They believed TLPs are in a unique position to address this.

Self-sufficiency should also be about the mental basically; it's important. Like I want to deal with that too. I just don't want to get into an apartment, have my own keys, have my own lease, and then I'm still hurting on the inside. It's more like adult homelessness is more, from what I've seen, it's choices that you make. Really – drugs, bad relationships, things like that. For youth, it's like my parents don't accept me because I'm gay. I can't be – they put me out or I just can't be here. Or I'm not doing this way in school – my parents – like or they just don't love me. They have, but it's like – oh my mama boyfriend wanted to touch me and I don't want him touching me. It's so – it's just different. And it's more – with youth, it's like I'm homeless and I'm dealing with these issues. It's not like I'm just homeless and I need a home.

[(Selena, 25)]

Participants consistently emphasized the emotional support offered by the TLP housing model as one of the most useful services they received during their time in the program. They were clear that housing, while critical, was not enough to adequately support them during times of homelessness. Rather, they reported that it was often the quality of emotional support provided that made the difference in their lives over time:

Melissa: I know that people, they get into situations where they're homeless and they have no place to go, so they take the first thing that pops up, but I feel like with people being in those situations, they need to make sure that they go to a place that will help them grow and that will help motivate them in a place that they will feel they get what they lack in their personal life, like love or happiness or just someone to communicate with, someone to talk to. Those are things that people should look for, because it's small things in life

that help you get to the big things. Interviewer: And those are also pretty big things, love, happiness –

Melissa: Yeah, but with today's youth, those things are just irregular. It's not something that people really – they don't – what's the word? How do I want to put this? People don't take things like that as seriously as they should, 'cause that's what helps mold people and grow people and make people into who they are. It's a way to express yourself instead of getting so angry all the time. If you aren't careful and you go into the wrong facility, you'll just add fuel to the fire that's already burning.

Interviewer: I think that's a really powerful point, the choice of taking the first bed because you obviously want to get off the street but how different those programs can be.

Melissa: Yeah, some you just go into and you're just there. You're just a person or you're just a client, but I felt like my time in (the TLP), I wasn't just a client. I was Melissa. I was there. I was a part of something even though I was just a client. I just felt like I was part of something.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived impact, if any, of the housing and support services provided by a transitional living program on the lives of formerly homeless youth over time. As the country moves increasingly toward permanent supportive housing models that move individuals directly into their own individual apartments, this investigation was timely in order to understand if TLPs, a shared group-residence housing model, has a place within a Housing First framework (Da Costa Nunez et al., 2011). Participants in this study believed TLPs to be an important strategy in our work to address youth homelessness. They understood the needs of unaccompanied young people in housing crisis as distinct from those of older adults and families and identified several aspects of the TLP housing model they valued both at the time of services and now, years later. Specifically, four primary themes related to the perceived utility of TLPs emerged from the data: family, individual connections, community and preparedness.

4.1. The importance of belonging: family, connection and community

Youth homelessness differs from adult and family homelessness in the high rates of family conflict that often precipitate situations of homelessness for young people (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Moore, 2006; Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). As other studies have found, this conflict can result in youth seeking out opportunities to build a sense of family missing from their home of origin (Brueckner, Green, & Sagers, 2011; Stablein, 2011). Participants saw an important function of the TLP to be bringing together young people in similar circumstances. Youth in the program shared two critical experiences: homelessness and living in the TLP. These were two experiences that in other settings made them feel different, isolated and less than their peers. However, at the TLP the stigma that accompanies both homelessness and living in a program was eliminated. At a time in their lives where peer acceptance is crucial, at the TLP young people did not have to hide what was going on in their lives, and, further, if they wanted to talk about it, they had 24-hour access to other young people who they felt would understand in a way that other peers could not.

For participants in this study, this function of bringing together young people experiencing housing crisis under one roof directly resulted in the creation of “family” – a concept they spoke about as they perceived it *should* be and not necessarily as what they had experienced within their own families of origin. In the TLP, family did not mean

they always had to get along but it did equate to generally uplifting one another, providing for each other emotionally and financially, sharing information about the world, and having fun together. Every single participant in this study described the relationships they built while in the TLP as the most important aspect of the program. It wasn't the bed or the food. It wasn't the clothes or the health care. To be clear, each of these basic needs services was certainly critical for participants, however the most influential experience they described during their interviews centered on the relationships they built with others. Relationships they likely would not have had the opportunity to form if they had been placed directly into their own apartment. Further, these relationships, for 94% of participants, have persisted years after leaving the program, proving to be an important continued source of both emotional and instrumental social support, and from the perspective of participants, the most beneficial outcome of their time in the program (see Holtzschneider, *in press* for more on this and other outcomes of participation in TLP as reported by participants).

Beyond the robust individual connections youth made while in the program, they were equally clear about the general sense of belonging that living in the TLP created. It provided a sense of community reinforced by simple acts such as having others to spend time with on the weekends, to make breakfast with, to wish them good morning and to welcome them home at night. It was about being a part of a group and feeling valued and respected by that group. Melissa's words above perhaps articulate this experience best: “I felt like my time in (the TLP), I wasn't just a client. I was Melissa. I was there...I just felt like I was part of something.”

4.2. Not ready to be on their own

When youth are at a TLP they are chronologically in the stage of late adolescence, a unique period between youth and adulthood. This stage, now widely accepted as continuing on through the mid 20s, is distinguished by a young person's increasing preparation to take on adult roles (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Strauch, 2004). Ideally, during this developmental stage youth are learning the skills required to manage the responsibilities necessary to achieve and maintain stability. Participants viewed the decision of a TLP to invest in this preparation as essential and intimately tied to the feeling of home. Participants felt that when housing programs do not address this type of preparation it not only neglects to prepare youth for the future, but as Melissa pointed out in Section 3.4.2, it creates a program that no longer provides a sense of home and rather becomes just “storage.” Participants reported it was validating to know that someone was invested in their success and was going to hold them accountable. It reminded them of what typical parents of teenagers would do, and while they may not have embraced the structure of the program at the time, participants saw this as also appropriate behavior for their developmental stage.

Young people entering a TLP, with rare exception, have never lived on their own before. While they possess a broad range of extraordinary competencies and survival skills, most have not had opportunities to practice responsibilities related to tenancy. Tasks such as paying utility bills, filling a refrigerator, completing general home maintenance and repair, and navigating relationships with landlords are new, and without ample preparation difficulties can arise quickly. In addition to their lack of experience with living on their own, young people are developmentally-primed to be spending as much time with peers as possible and frequently doing so while engaged in high-risk activities. The excitement and autonomy associated with having one's own place at a young age can lead to the challenges described by participants in Section 3.4 including eviction, an outcome of significant consequence that follows them into adulthood making it difficult to obtain future housing.

Participants felt strongly that the structure of a TLP and corresponding accountability and emotional support also provided the motivation necessary to move forward at a time in their life when it was difficult to connect to the future and cope with the stress and sadness that

accompanied the circumstances leading to their stays in the program. They described that the investment of the program in their futures, becomes internalized, leading to not only wanting more for one's life but to also letting others see the good or as Eshawn described, the "hope," that is inside them. It is the idea that someone cared enough to get them on the right path, to make sure that they followed through and that someone actually saw them when they were coming from a place where they often felt invisible and without the personal power and efficacy to make any positive change in their lives.

4.3. Consistency with positive youth development

The findings from this study echo well-established knowledge from the positive youth development literature. Participants provided numerous examples in their interviews of how through the services provided, and relationships built, the TLP directly fostered what is known in PYD as the 6C's: confidence, character, caring, competence, connection and contribution (Lerner & Israeloff, 2007; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003 — more on the 6th C of contribution and participants' actions to make a difference in the lives of others following participation in a TLP can be found in Holtschneider, *in press*). During their time in the program participants reported that they found the environment and support necessary to allow them to become the people they wanted to be. They received services that brought futures they had not before envisioned as possible into focus, and experienced connections that made them believe they were worth love and validation from others and, perhaps most importantly, from themselves.

4.4. Limitations and future research

This study responds to a direct call from scholars in the area of youth homelessness for services research (Kidd, 2012; Milburn et al., 2005), however it is not able to state the efficacy of TLPs as an intervention for youth in situations of homelessness, and this is not its intention. Rather, the purpose of this study was to understand the perceived utility of TLP services from the perspectives of the young people who have participated in them. This is essential if we are to design, provide and adequately fund services that are consistent with youth recommendations. However, it is equally crucial that future research also investigates the usefulness of services through prospective cohort study designs, when possible with randomized, controlled trials and quasi-experimental methods, to determine the internal validity of findings, and replicate with representative samples to increase the generalizability of the findings, something this study is not able to do.

It is also important to note that this study is restricted to participants from one site located in an urban area with a sample that was 94% African American. Therefore findings from this study are limited to the selected sample of youth who previously experienced homelessness in the city of Chicago and participated in the TLP operated by the chosen study site. Additionally, the results of this study are limited by the sample selection method utilized and participants may not be representative of all young people who received services from the TLP. The transferability of these findings to other contexts and/or participants is dependent on consistency with both the selected sample and specific study site. It may be useful for future research to replicate this study with participants from more than one TLP, a more diverse sample and/or in a rural area.

5. Conclusions

The importance of family, connection, community and preparedness are certainly not new themes for those engaged in youth work. They are, however, themes frequently not included in discussions around program models associated with a Housing First approach. Housing First as a philosophy, "the belief that all young people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if

they are first provided with housing" (Gaetz, 2014, p. 15) is of primary importance. A substantial amount of research supports the necessity of bringing people experiencing homelessness into housing without qualification before they are able to take steps toward future stability (Goering et al., 2014; Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). However, we must not confuse Housing First as a philosophy with Housing First as a specific program model limited to moving people immediately into individual apartments (Gaetz et al., 2013). The findings presented here indicate that young people deeply value the TLP model and moving away from the emotional, practical and developmental supports they provide would be a mistake. Participants saw the TLP model of congregate living and therefore 24-hour access to support from staff and peers, as a critical step toward long-term stability. Most participants believed that young people need time to adequately prepare for independent living. Equally important was the opportunity to do so surrounded by others who can identify with their circumstances and provide a range of supports intended to assist with their transition to stability and wellness.

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Appendix A. Interview questions

1. Beginning with when you left the program, tell me as much as you can, and are comfortable with, about how your life has been since leaving the TLP.
2. If the TLP did not exist, would your life be different? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. How would you describe your experience in the TLP to a friend who was considering staying there?
4. Knowing what you know now, if could go back and design a TLP for yourself at the time you needed it, what would it look like? (What would you keep the same, change, add?)

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