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Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for High School Counselors and McKinney-Vento Liaisons

### **Access to Shelter and Housing for Unaccompanied Youth**

Unaccompanied youth under the age of 18 face challenges when accessing shelter or housing, due both to lack of available shelter and housing and the inability to access those resources without parental consent. Despite these challenges, certain models and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act can provide aid to help house unaccompanied youth.

**Q: Is parental consent required for a youth under age 18 to stay in a shelter or housing program?**

**A:** While this depends on state laws and licensing requirements, in most cases the practical answer is yes. Certain states require the consent of the parent, a court or a placing agency or state department *before* a child may be admitted to the identified program or facility. If a state does not require the consent of the parent to stay in a facility or program, it will likely require that the parent receive notification that the child is present at the facility or at least written notification of the policies in place at the facility. As a result, in most cases the shelter or housing program will need to contact the parent and tell the parent where the child is. However, if shelter staff believe the youth is in danger due to parental abuse, the staff can choose to contact child protective services instead of the parent. Also, if the parent cannot be located or reached, the facility will often be required to report the youth's admission to child protective services.

For example, under a typical state law or licensing requirement, when a youth arrives at a shelter the provider has a certain time period, usually 48 to 72 hours, in which the shelter must notify the youth's parent or guardian of the youth's admission to the shelter. If the youth's parents are not reachable or if contacting the parents would lead to harm for the youth, the shelter should make a referral to child protective services or other analogous state agency. Upon admission, the shelter would have the youth's parents or guardians fill out a placement agreement, which may lay out the plan for care, any parental involvement and/or the duration of stay, among other things. This agreement may also contain a medical release. For more information about your state's requirements for youth shelter admission, please see NAEHCY's memo with state-by-state information on parental consent and notification requirements, available at: [uhy-state-laws.doc](#)

### **Housing/Shelter Models for Unaccompanied Youth**

**Q: What housing and shelter options are available for unaccompanied youth?**

**A:** Communities around the country have developed a number of different successful shelter and housing options to provide youth with a stable place to live. Some of these options include host homes, group homes, independent living programs, and emergency shelter designed for youth under the age of 18.

**Q: What is a host home and what are its benefits?**

**A:** A host home is long-term housing with a family with the support of a counselor/coach and additional services, sometimes including a modest stipend to offset some of the costs incurred for food and utilities. Generally, the youth has a preexisting relationship with the family. Host homes can be a very good option for unaccompanied youth, as they are relatively low-cost, are a positive family-like setting, and can allow youth to maintain positive relationships with adults. Further, many youth can identify adults willing to provide housing with support.

**Q: What is a group home and what are its benefits?**

**A:** A group home is long-term housing with a group of unaccompanied youth who live together in a home dedicated to that purpose, usually with an adult providing supervision and counseling/coaching. Group homes can be a good option for youth who need more support than a host home can provide. They are also a good option for youth who prefer to live with other young people and cannot identify adults to provide housing.

**Q: What is an independent living program and what are its benefits?**

**A:** Independent living programs involve long-term housing in scattered-site apartments where youth live independently, with the rent subsidized or paid by the sponsoring program, and usually with counseling/coaching. Independent living can be a good option for youth who are capable of living independently, but need financial support in the form of a subsidy to maintain housing.

**Q: What does an emergency shelter program for youth look like and what are its benefits?**

**A:** An emergency shelter program is short-term, emergency housing in a shelter designed for youth under age 18 or in a separate, youth-oriented wing of an adult shelter. While emergency shelter should not be considered a long-term option for homeless youth, it can provide a safe place for them to stay while waiting for more permanent options, such as a host home, group home, or independent living situation.

**Q: If my community does not have enough shelter or housing options for youth, can I start a program?**

**A:** Yes. All the tools and guidance you need to start a youth housing program are available in NAEHCY's publication *Housing + High School = Success: Schools and Communities Uniting to House Unaccompanied Youth* (2009). It is available for free at <http://naehcy.org/educational-resources/housing-high-school-success>

## **The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act**

**Q: How can the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act help unaccompanied youth?**

**A:** The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act can help youth in many ways. First, it contains a Basic Center Program that supports emergency shelters for up to 15 days for unaccompanied youth under 18 years old. Second, the law supports Transitional Living Programs for youth, which provide long-term housing for up to 18 months and life skills for youth 16-21 years old. Third, the law contains a Street Outreach Program to provide outreach and services to youth on the streets. Lastly, the law funds the National Runaway Switchboard, trainings for youth workers, and other information and supports.

**Q: Can a young person stay in Runaway and Homeless Youth Act housing without a parent or guardian?**

**A:** Yes, but the law requires the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program to contact the youth's family within 72 hours of the youth entering the shelter or housing.

**Q: Who can an unaccompanied youth contact for help finding Runaway and Homeless Youth Act housing?**

**A:** The National Runaway Switchboard is a good place to start: 1-800-621-4000 or [www.nrscrisisline.org](http://www.nrscrisisline.org). The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth also has information about Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs: 301-608-8098 or [www.ncfy.org](http://www.ncfy.org), as does the National Network for Youth, [www.nn4youth.org](http://www.nn4youth.org).

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