

Young people aged 18 to 25 are neither adolescents nor adults, but in a distinct time of transition. If they receive the right supports and services during this critical juncture, the hope is that they can avoid homelessness and reliance on public assistance for the long haul.

Christopher Guzman is among the first wave of residents to live in New York/New York III apartments slated for young adults in transition.



A Home for Five More Years

Creating a solution to homelessness for young men and women.

BY KENDRA HURLEY

AT 22, Christopher Guzman would like to consider himself an adult. But life in the new, brick Bronx building known as Louis Nine, where he lives, reminds Guzman of his teen years spent in too many group homes. “It’s just the atmosphere, it’s just the rules and regulations of certain things that brings it back up like you was in a group home,” says Guzman, an amiable young man with an abundance of nervous energy.

There’s the fact that visitors must sign in with a security guard and be gone by 11 p.m. on weeknights, 1 a.m. on weekends. There are the caseworkers with whom Guzman must meet regularly and the monthly room inspections to assess his housekeeping. There’s the pot smoking, the drinking, and the bickering among the other residents. And then there’s the stealing. “Some people will leave their door open, and that’s it—they’re f--ked after that,” he says. “It’s still a group-home atmosphere,” he shrugs.

In fact, Louis Nine is trying desperately to distinguish itself from the group homes and other institutions its residents have recently left behind. That’s been one of the program’s biggest challenges, says James McFarlane, program director for the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter, which runs the residence. Louis Nine is a housing program for 46 rent-paying young men and women aged 18 to 25 who have spent time in institutions, including foster care group homes, mental health residential treatment facilities, juvenile correctional centers and homeless shelters.

Historically, there have been two social service systems: one for children and another for adults. Louis Nine is part of an emerging trend to tailor supports and services for a third group—18- to 25-year-olds. The idea is that young people of this age group are neither adolescents nor adults, but in a distinct time of transition. If they receive the right supports and services during this critical juncture, the hope is that they can avoid homelessness and reliance on public assistance for the long haul. “There’s still the presumption that if you give them the support they need, they will become independent,” explains Michael Zisser, CEO of The Door, a nonprofit social service and legal support organization.

Louis Nine’s specific goal is to help young adults who have spent part or all of their adolescence in institutions become ready to live independently. Young people leaving foster care and other institutions often have a difficult time making it on their own. Many spend time homeless or incarcerated. One national study in the 1990s by Westat, a social services research group, found that four years after leaving foster care, a quarter had spent at least one night homeless, and fewer than half were employed.

Over the last decade, government officials and philanthropists across the country have searched for ways to change this, providing housing vouchers, extending the age young people can remain in foster care from 18 to 21, setting up new transitional support programs for older youth in care, and offering education grants. Yet rates of homelessness among youth who have been institutionalized have been stubbornly high. In the Midwest, a 2010 study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center found that by age 23 or 24, almost 40 percent of the 723 former foster youth followed by researchers had spent at least one night homeless or had couch surfed between the homes of friends, family and strangers. In New York today, officials say they continue to see hundreds of young people becoming homeless after leaving foster care.

These 200 beds serve one of the toughest populations ever to be served in supportive housing: institutionalized young adults who have never lived on their own before.

The Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter is one of eight nonprofit organizations that have established a pioneering New York City housing initiative to reduce rates of homelessness among young men and women by working with young people before they have nowhere to go. Four hundred young people aging out of institutions or living in homeless shelters are getting a place to live for a few years while they receive intensive, hands-on experience mastering the skills of day-to-day adult living. These are skills many of us take for granted: grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, paying bills and holding down a job.

But there's no guarantee that simply providing more services and supports to young adults actually helps them succeed. And the catch at housing programs like Louis Nine: It's up to the young adults—many of whom are eager to break

free of programs and authority—to decide whether or not to take part in trainings and social services. By contract, government deems these services to be voluntary, and organizations are loathe to evict young people who don't join in. Many of the programs are struggling to find new ways to engage residents and make these extra years of support worthwhile.

"It's been extremely challenging, says McFarlane. "They can't live here forever, and if we don't prepare them for the real world now, we're going to be doing them a disservice."

This is a fledgling experiment, to be sure. All but one of the city's supportive housing programs for young people are less than 10 years old and the vast majority are less than three. Their premise of providing housing and help to troubled young adults before they spend months and years in city homeless shelters or hustling on the streets might sound commonsensical. But it has never before been tried with more than a few dozen young people at a time. The creators have an unprecedented opportunity to point out valuable new strategies for helping young people with special needs transition to adulthood and independence. Whether or not they succeed depends largely on whether or not they are able to connect with young adults who have no place else to go, young people who would otherwise have become homeless, in and out of institutions and trouble.



Only in the last decade did programs like Louis Nine begin to crop up in New York City and around the country. The first ones took only a handful of young adults, and they often selected residents who were highly motivated and likely to succeed, such as young men and women in college or already working.

For many young people who weren't ready or able to live on their own, one alternative was the adult supportive housing programs that sprouted across the city during the 1990s, thanks to the state's long-overdue reinvestment of funds saved through the widespread deinstitutionalization of mentally ill men and women starting in the 1970s. But to move into these programs, a man or woman had to have spent substantial time in a homeless shelter or suffered for years with chronic mental illness. Young adults aging out of children's systems rarely fit these criteria, and when they did, it was almost impossible to find a program that would accommodate the proclivities of young adults who, almost by definition, resist rules, authority and programs.

"The data say that individuals with [mental] health problems at the age of 17 or 16 on, until about 25 years of age, are trying to get out of programs and get people out of their life," explains Hewitt B. "Rusty" Clark, director of the National Network on Youth Transition for Behavioral Health and a professor at the University of South Florida. "But most of our adult systems are designed around how many individuals they are going to be serving. When someone isn't stepping up to the plate and doing exactly what's asked of them, they aren't going to be serving them."

Miguel Ayala knows all too well. Articulate, bright, and haunted by his past, Ayala was a writer at *Represent*, the magazine written by and for teens in foster care that I once edited. Often within mere minutes of meeting a well-intentioned adult, Ayala lay bare the Dickensian details of his childhood—his mother’s abandoning him; the abuse he endured in a relative’s home; the bullying at his group home for foster teens with mental illness.

People responded to him, and Ayala had formed an extensive network of concerned adults. A growing body of research shows that foster teens with this kind of support system are far more likely to succeed during those tenuous years after care than those without adults to depend on. Ayala had caring adults in spades.

Because he had a serious mental illness—bipolar disorder—he also qualified for supportive housing when he left foster care. Many of us who knew him assumed that unlike other young adults who flounder trying to figure out where to live and how to scrape by after care, Ayala was set.

And yet, shortly after Ayala turned 21—the year young people age out of foster care—he became homeless. He remained homeless, on and off, for more than a year, bouncing between the infamous Bellevue shelter for mentally ill men, psychiatric hospitals, and the homes of friends or girlfriends whom he usually met at programs for the mentally ill. During that time, numerous caseworkers tried to find Ayala a housing program, but they could not find one willing to take him in. Part of the problem was his young age. In 2000, not one of the nearly 10,000 beds for adults with mental illness in the city’s adult residential system was dedicated to serving young adults. The average age of the residents was 45.

Some of the programs Ayala interviewed with were clearly designed for residents who would need supportive housing their entire lives. Many of the residents were coming out of long-term hospitalization and appeared sedated, sitting in the common room staring blankly ahead. Visiting these programs upset Ayala, who loved to socialize. He said it made him fear for his future.

At the time, the city’s earliest supportive housing programs for young adults leaving foster care were just opening, including Schafer Hall in East Harlem and the Chelsea Foyer on Manhattan’s west side. But together they housed fewer than 70 young adults. Ayala applied to the Foyer. Housed in an old YMCA building, it was modeled to feel like a college dorm, with small apartments and common areas where the residents could hang out together. The place had felt good to him, like somewhere he’d want to call home. But the majority of young adults it took were higher functioning than he was, and had often already held jobs. Ayala was rejected.

With each new rejection, Ayala became increasingly depressed and despondent. He began taking his psychiatric medications erratically and sometimes not at all, often opting, instead, for marijuana. He developed a favorite hospi-

tal—St. Vincent’s—where he went whenever he felt suicidal, or actually attempted to overdose, usually from Tylenol PM. The food there was good, he said, the staff was nice, and it was often a welcome break from the shelters.

Eventually Ayala landed a room in one of the coveted residences run by Fountain House, a clubhouse for mentally ill adults in a brownstone on the Upper West Side. But as with most housing programs, the rest of the residents were older than Ayala, and the house rules reflected this.

Successful housing programs for people of Ayala’s age allow young adults to learn through trial and error, says Clark. The idea for the practitioners running these programs is to find a balance “between two axioms”—maximizing the likelihood that transitioning young adults will develop confidence in their own skills, while allowing them to still make mistakes and experience real-life consequences when they mess up. To do this, says Clark, a mistake comes with consequences—but not outright rejection and a return to homelessness.

But at Fountain House, Ayala found that the rules were strict, and that violent behavior, drug use or nonpayment of rent could send him back to the streets. Ayala panicked—a reaction Clark says is standard behavior for young adults in housing programs, who almost instinctively test limits.

In only two weeks, Ayala was hospitalized three times for overdosing on over-the-counter medication, and he returned to the shelter system. Only this time, the city required that he go to a shelter for men with substance-abuse issues. And in a curious twist, addiction became Ayala’s ticket to a somewhat more stable life. He now qualified for adult housing for people with mental illness and addiction—and his diagnosis finally matched available housing. He moved into a home for men coming straight from shelters that had virtually no therapeutic or rehabilitative element to it. Ayala has lived in housing programs for most of the last five years and continues to struggle with addiction to this day.



Only very recently did the housing landscape begin to look more promising for young adults like Ayala. In 2005, the city and state create the unprecedented, if awkwardly named, New York/New York III Initiative, which Louis Nine is part of. This was the third phase of supported housing investment from the state and local government, and the first to include a large component targeted for young adults. New York/New York III provides streamlined funding to house and support 400 young adults. About half of the programs that will be funded this way began operating in the last two years, and they are mostly intended for young adults who have recently been in foster care, some already with histories of homelessness. The remainder, slated primarily for young men and women leaving mental health facilities, have not yet been assigned to the nonprofits who will develop them.

To get an apartment through the program, a young person is supposed to be working or in school and have some sort of income—if not through work then through SSI disability payments or public assistance. Once accepted, residents are supposed to pay 30 percent of their income in rent, and the program covers the rest, including services like career counseling, case management, and help learning how to live independently.

Some of the programs are in apartments scattered throughout Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Landlords rent these apartments to social services agencies, whose caseworkers assign them to young adults leaving care. They check on their clients regularly and offer them services at their agencies. Others are like Louis Nine, based in their own buildings with common areas and caseworkers on-site.

Together, these 200 beds serve one of the toughest populations ever to be served in supportive housing: institutionalized young adults who have never lived on their own before.

“These are young people who have been traumatized, abandoned, rejected, told they wouldn’t amount to anything,” says McFarlane. “You’re dealing not with the individual. You’re dealing with their whole history.”

Coming from group homes and other institutions, many of the young men and women in New York/New York III apartments are used to having the minutiae of their lives managed for them. Some have never cooked a meal or done their own laundry, and never learned to take medication or make a doctor’s appointment on their own. A large number struggle with health issues as well as mental health issues. Pretty much all of them have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families, living in extreme poverty or suffering from abuse and neglect. They desperately need not only a place to live but help getting on their feet.

“They just need so much more support,” says Denise Hinds, assistant executive director for residential programs at the Chelsea Foyer, run by Good Shepherd Services. Although the Foyer was established in 2003, the program began working with young people from the New York/New York III program two years ago. She says the current group of young people has challenges she didn’t see as frequently during the Foyer’s earlier years. “There are more with mental health issues, more with substance-abuse issues, anger management, you name it. Talking to a young person who is struggling in those ways about having a job, you almost have to talk pre-job about some of those things because they’re not going to stay in the job. We have to do a lot more hand-holding.”

At the same time, having had their fill of caseworkers and programs, many young people in New York/New York III housing are eager to be free. This leaves providers in a difficult position. They struggle to find the balance between too much structure and too little, between serving as landlords who want rent paid on time and counselors eager to give residents the benefit of the doubt and chances to learn from mistakes. Too

little guidance, and residents fritter away their days, missing opportunities. Too much hand-holding, and residents view the program as an extension of group-home life—just another program with rules and regulations to resist.

Christopher Guzman is a fairly typical resident. He spent much of his youth in group homes and other foster care institutions, takes psychiatric medication and, before he heard about New York/New York III, was certain he was on the fast track to homelessness.

A little over a year ago, at 20 years old and about to age out of care, he had no job and no prospects for one. Because much of his schooling had taken place on campuses for foster kids instead of a regular high school, Guzman had a diploma designed for special education students—one rarely recognized by employers. His mother died when he was 6, and he had no idea where or with whom he could live after leaving foster care.

When his second-to-last group home closed, his foster care agency tried to find new homes with relatives or foster families for everyone living there. They could not find a family for Guzman, only underscoring for him how truly on his own he would be.

“They want us to move in with families,” he’d said angrily. “With what families? We’re in this predicament because of f--ing families!”

Guzman was about to become a father. He was excited about the baby but had no idea how he would support himself, much less a child. “I was headed for a shelter,” he remembers.

At the peak of Guzman’s desperation, a friend of his from another group home was placed in New York/New York III housing. “He said, ‘Yo, I’m going in there, you should go in there with me,’” Guzman remembers. Guzman’s caseworker sent in an application, and soon he was interviewing at Louis Nine. He liked it, especially since he knew a few of the people who lived there from other group homes he’d been in. Also, Guzman’s girlfriend lived in the Bronx, and he felt it was especially important to be close to her and their baby. He also really liked that the laundry machines in Louis Nine’s basement were free.

So in the spring of 2009, Guzman went on public assistance, signed the lease for his Louis Nine studio that would be renewable for up to five years, and moved his belongings into a small, freshly painted apartment on the building’s second floor.

For a while, Guzman felt relief that he had a place to live, and he liked having his own apartment. He worked cleaning schools in a summer job program for youth and paid rent more or less on time. But then, as happens to so many young people a few months after first leaving care, things started going very wrong.

Guzman’s girlfriend had wanted him to find an apartment where they could live with their daughter as a family. Frustrated, she broke up with him and moved with their daughter to Virginia. As Guzman waited for a judge to tell

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him whether he could have a role in his newborn daughter's life, he spiraled into a depression. After his summer job ended, he sold water at Giants stadium for a while, but eventually quit and began paying rent erratically.

In a matter of months, a dispute about a woman turned Guzman's best friend in the building into his worst enemy, along with his friend's friends. Guzman stopped feeling safe at home. "There's going to be a time when something is said or happens when we have an altercation and throw blows, because we see each other every day," he said, about his former friends.

Eventually, Guzman's ex-girlfriend moved back to New York with their daughter. Now Guzman can see his daughter only three days a month by court order, he says, and he gives her mother whatever he can afford in child support, often just \$5 here or there. He recently enrolled in a job training program at Bellevue hospital to become a janitor, though he admits that his attendance is spotty.

Up to now, Louis Nine staff has mostly overlooked Guzman's missed rent payments, largely because he is one of the building's handful of residents who enthusiastically attends the building meetings and workshops on topics like job interviewing and anger management. Guzman is agreeable and they can tell he's trying. He says he's grateful this seems to be enough to buy him a little more time, which, just now, is what he feels he needs most.



Rusty Clark first started imagining a new way of working with young adults like Guzman in the early 1990s, when he was conducting a study of children in the foster care system with

emotional and behavioral issues at the University of South Florida and found that these young people moved homes an average of four times a year. He wanted to know how to help young people like them transition to adulthood. At the time, there was little research that defined exactly how to nudge young people with behavioral and emotional issues toward self-sufficient adulthood, and he figured the best he could do was learn from others pursuing innovative strategies.

Clark traveled to Minnesota, which at the time led the nation in helping people with disabilities transition to adulthood. While the state had many programs that worked well with people who had mental retardation or physical disabilities, Clark found that they often screened out those young adults with diagnoses of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

"These are the throwaway kids," says Clark. "Huge portions of these individuals end up in juvenile justice facilities, and it became very clear that something needed to be done."

Clark and his colleagues scoured the research but found no effective programs to help people who had emotional difficulties become self-sufficient adults. "People just didn't know what to do with youth and young adults with mental health challenges in this transition population," Clark remembers.

He and his team at the University of South Florida and at the National Network on Youth Transition for Behavioral Health established the Transition to Independence Process (TIP), which starts from the premise that it is not up to the young adults themselves to be motivated. Rather, it is a program's responsibility to find ways to engage them. This requires patient, flexible staff members, as well as a wide array of services and supports for employment, education,

housing, and mental health. That way, if one service isn't working for a young person, there are others to try, and staff willing to try them.

In the years since, programs in more than 20 states have adopted the TIP model, and several studies have found it to have significantly improved outcomes for young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Clark tells the story of one 19-year-old woman with severe bipolar disorder to explain how the TIP-program works. Stabilized on medication, she moved into her own apartment near the community college she was attending, with plans for a caseworker to check in on her regularly. Two weeks later, says Clark, her world was crumbling. "We found her off her meds, in a state of depression and not maintaining her activities and engagement with the community college," Clark remembers.

Instead of panicking and deciding the young woman was not ready or able to live on her own, the multidisciplinary TIP team set her up in an apartment shared with another young woman from the program, each with their own bedrooms. A mentor from the college lives nearby and checks in frequently. So far the new arrangement has worked well.

"You need to think smart about what an individual would like to do, and what you need to do to tailor your supports to make sure it's successful," explains Clark, who authored the handbook *Transition of Youth & Young Adults With Emotional Behavior Difficulties*. "These aren't easy things to pull off."

Such programs not only need ample resources but also staff who know when to go back to the drawing board when a plan isn't working and when to allow young people to progress at their own, often idiosyncratic pace. Some young people will hop from job to job. Others will experiment with drugs. These are normal behaviors among young adults.

It's also normal for a young person to resist therapy and other services, Clark says. "As a psychologist, I may feel confident that this young lady needs services for trauma. But she is so system savvy, and so wary of all the imposed services that have been pushed on her, that I understand she's not ready for this type of intervention, so there's no reason to go there."

A more effective method, says Clark, is to first build trust by helping her work toward her own goals, and through that work she may begin to see that her counselors have her best interests in mind. Then, she might consider therapy.

"We want to help her come over time to understand for herself how it could be possibly beneficial to her to address these previous traumas," says Clark. "That might not be until after her third boyfriend, where he's been abusive or not really there for her, where she finally wants to learn something about how to choose a friend or develop a relationship that has features that would really be there for her."

The key is collaborative planning and not expecting

young people to immediately get with the program and work toward goals set by caseworkers. Service plans should focus on what's important to the young person—whether it's playing basketball or reuniting with an estranged parent. A small but growing body of research is finding this approach effective in helping young people develop confidence in their ability to set and reach goals and, ultimately, transition more smoothly to adulthood.



Many of the New York/New York III programs use some elements of this approach. As the first wave of new programs reaches the end of their first and second years, staff have been discovering their own set of "best practices," which they share with each other at monthly meetings in the downtown offices of the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Some of these practices sound simple, but providers say they have made a big difference in their programs—like taking a walk while meeting with a resident, or bringing them breakfast. Such strategies can make a meeting feel more like a conversation and less like a mandated check-in.

Supervisors at SCO Family of Services, which runs 36 scattered-site apartments in Queens, found that they avoid confusion among residents by clearly splitting up the responsibilities of landlord and counselor among different staff. Other organizations have dropped poorly attended group meetings and focused instead on one-to-one sessions.

Many of the providers say they were initially overwhelmed and unprepared for the mental health issues their clients faced. In response, the Corporation for Supportive Housing hired a clinical consultant who specializes in trauma to be available to all of the housing groups. She meets with caseworkers to help them with particularly challenging cases and to better understand the effects of trauma. Now she also meets regularly with some residents.

But even with this support, New York/New York III providers will not have what the TIP model considers essential: flexible backup plans for young adults who are failing in their programs. So far, this is proving to be one of the program's biggest problems.

The young residents have tested the program in every way possible—from quitting their jobs as soon as they move in, to letting friends move in with them, to not paying rent. Without any backup plan, many providers say they feel they have no choice but to "terminate," or discharge some residents, despite the fact that many have nowhere else to go.

Programs interviewed for this story say they evict between 20 and 50 percent of the residents they accept—a tactic they know is contrary to New York/New York III's mission of serving the neediest young people but which seems to be necessary for the programs' own survival. Reasons for eviction range from the commonplace—a resident refuses to both pay rent and make a plan to do so—to the harrowing—one

A Pioneering Housing Program Adjusts

NEW YORK CITY has one of the nation's first supportive housing programs designed for adults under the age of 25: the Christopher Residence/Foyer in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan.

"We felt like the missing link for homeless youth was having a specific program that met their needs, rather than building them into existing programs for adults," remembers Denise Hinds, assistant executive director for residential programs at the Foyer.

Launched six years ago as a pilot project, Common Ground Community and Good Shepherd Services modeled the Foyer after a successful European housing program for young adults—with one key difference. The European model has a mix of residents who need different levels of support. The idea is that the low-needs residents—many of whom are working and attending school—can serve as role models for the needier young adults, who will likely eat up more of the program resources.

However, as noted in a recent report released by Common Ground Community and Good Shepherd Services about the Chelsea Foyer's first five years, finding public funding for young adults who are not high needs is almost impossible in the United States. So Common Ground and Good Shepherd Services adapted the model to mix two groups of "high needs" young adults—those who are runaways or homeless, and those who are aging out of foster care.

The program's 40 residents live in a renovated YMCA in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. The building is set up to be a cross between a college dorm and an apartment building, to encourage residents both to feel independent but also to signal that it's not a place to live indefinitely. Young adults are supposed to stay there for no more than two years. During that time, caseworkers help them master life skills, with a focus on learning how to hold down a job. Caseworkers host career workshops, help residents set goals and direct them to job centers. When a young adult is ready to move on from the program, caseworkers help them find housing.

Initially staying true to the evidence-based European model, Good Shepherd Services required references and a letter of intent from all prospective residents, part of an application process designed to attract a number of stable, motivated residents who had a good shot at being self-sufficient in the program's two-year time limit. But keeping the program running has required a creative patchwork of funding, and most funding sources have their own requirements for whom to admit and how to admit them. When the Foyer began accepting 14 young people from the New York/New York III program about two years ago, the program staff adapted their application process to accept more young people with mental health needs and substance-abuse issues. About half of the Foyer's residents now need a high level of support. Hinds concedes that adjusting to this new type of resident has been challenging. "In the Foyer we thought we were going to be dealing with a young person who was better prepared," she says. "But they're not as well prepared. And the work with them is a lot more basic."

Hinds says that staff has now upped the frequency of room inspections from once a month to daily, and two staff must now be on call at night, instead of one.

"Case management has needed to adjust to become more hands-on," the recent report echoes Hinds, adding that case managers now manage some residents' medication or accompany them to doctors' appointments, a practice "that runs counter to the model's core philosophy."

It is too soon to tell what the outcomes will be of these young people who entered the program over the last couple of years. But the program has tracked outcomes of its earlier residents. In the first five years, about one out of every five residents left before they completed the program, often because it was too rigorous and required a high level of motivation, says Hinds. But of those who stayed, the majority were able to se-

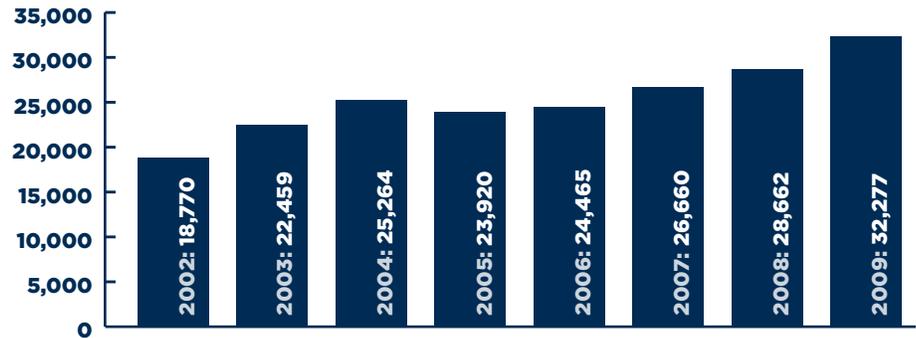
"We felt like the missing link for homeless youth was having a specific program that met their needs, rather than building them into existing programs for adults."

cure stable housing and a job. Seventy-seven percent moved to stable housing, either signing or co-signing a lease or living with a roommate or family member or in a dorm room. Seventy-five percent were employed.

Hinds expects the next generation of Foyer residents to have a tougher time becoming independent. With high rates of unemployment, many of the jobs Foyer residents typically held are now filled by college graduates. "I think across the board kids are going to stay longer with us because they realize it's hard to be on their own with so few resources," she says. "If they don't get the hours they need, then how are they going to pay those rents and sustain themselves?" —Kendra Hurley

YOUNG ADULTS IN CITY HOMELESS SHELTERS

The number of 18- to 29-year-olds receiving services from New York City's Department of Homeless Services has steadily increased since 2002.



Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

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young woman threw bleach on her roommate, refused counseling, then assaulted her next roommate as well.

Some who get evicted from New York/New York III housing head for the shelter system, providers say. Others simply disappear. Caseworkers at Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services are required to do a "due diligence" check every three months on everyone they lose contact with from their New York/New York III apartments. They check the shelter system, the Department of Corrections, psychiatric hospitals and the morgue.

Alison Harte of the Corporation for Supportive Housing fears that the recent freeze on federal Section 8 rental vouchers in New York means young people leaving foster care who would normally have moved into their own apartments will now find their way into New York/New York III apartments, edging out needier but potentially more difficult-to-manage young people. As it is, many providers say they routinely screen out about a third of the residents who apply.

"If you have a program set up to take really hard-to-serve young people, but you don't have the systems in place to ensure that they get served, then it's going to fail," says Harte. "That's the juncture where we are at with New York/New York III. How do we morph that so it does work for young people?"



James McFarlane hopes to be able to answer that question before the year is out. McFarlane is trained as a social worker and has worked as a substance abuse counselor and in foster care prevention programs for more than a decade. When he interviewed to become Louis Nine's program director, staff warned him how hard his job would be. "They did a good job in the interview of trying to scare me," he remembers.

Still, when he became Louis Nine's third program director in under a year, he was surprised at the extent of disarray he inherited. Almost all of the residents had missed multiple

rent payments. Many with serious mental illnesses were refusing to take psychiatric medication and were acting out by cursing out staff. And though the building had been open less than a year, a number of the apartments had holes in the walls or doors, the results of fits of anger.

McFarlane has quickly set about making changes. He's gotten rid of therapeutic-sounding "groups"—a word he thinks has too many connotations with group-home life—and has replaced it with "peer-to-peer discussions," the idea being that residents, not staff, lead building reform.

"I'm trying to put ownership back on the tenants," explains McFarlane. "If they want things to change, they have to police themselves."

A recent peer-to-peer discussion suggests he's onto something. Some of the residents at Louis Nine had poor hygiene, and other tenants complained to no avail. But when residents confronted one another about it in a discussion facilitated by two tenants and monitored by staff, suddenly those who hadn't been bathing began to look after themselves. "Instead of staff counseling these individuals, it was the community turning on itself," says McFarlane. "That kind of peer pressure has created turnaround in some of the behaviors we were seeing."

But McFarlane believes one of the biggest problems facing Louis Nine is what the residents perceive as a lack of consequences for their actions. For example, no one has ever been evicted.

"When they get into the real world, there are consequences. If you don't pay your rent, you get evicted," he says. "You don't perform well on your job, you get fired. You don't meet a person's needs in a relationship, chances are the relationship suffers or it ends. There are always consequences, and I think we need those structures in place to have a better chance at success."

So McFarlane has begun taking residents to court, and since he has been doing that, one resident who was close to being evicted moved into an apartment in Brooklyn with his

“I’m trying to put ownership back on the tenants,” explains McFarlane. “If they want things to change, they have to police themselves.”

partner. McFarlane hopes that for most residents facing a potential eviction, once they realize he’s serious, they’ll do what they need to do to stay in the program.



For all young adult housing programs, finding the right balance of consequences and compassion is an ongoing experiment. For the New York/New York III programs, how to achieve that balance is an increasingly urgent question. As the programs for young adults leaving foster care enter their second and third years and those for young people leaving mental health facilities prepare to open, the answer may well determine the program’s fate.

In this difficult economy, young adults are more likely to be unemployed. The city is slashing government services for young adults transitioning to adulthood. Young people who in the past may have quickly found gainful employment and moved into apartments with Section 8 vouchers no longer have the option. Now more than even two years ago, New York/New York III is meeting an urgent, critical need, providing young adults a true rarity in the city—affordable housing.

Whether the program can stay true to its original mission to serve the city’s neediest young people (rather than higher-achieving youth) depends, in large part, on whether it can find solutions to two very common problems—on the one hand, young people languishing in the programs and treating them as an extension of their previous group-home lives; on the other, young men and women who get kicked out.

Harte believes there’s a better way. If the programs began housing young adults one or two years before they leave foster care and other institutions, participants would have the chance to learn and make mistakes in their New York/New York III apartments while remaining eligible for the richer clinical supports of the children’s systems. They’d also have the option of moving back to foster care if they found they couldn’t handle the more independent way of life. If they

stayed in the programs, they could remain in the same apartment when they age out of foster care.

New Jersey is already experimenting with this approach, and for years Lighthouse Youth Services in Ohio has placed young people in foster care in their own apartments, then let them take over the leases when they age out.

Here in New York City, it’s hard to imagine changing a new, bold program like New York/New York III in such a radical way, but it might make the difference between whether or not the program stays true to its original intention. In the meantime, it continues to buy its tenants a few years of housing, and the chance to build a self-sufficient life if they’re ready.

Back at Louis Nine, on a warm afternoon, Guzman seems not to know that he’s up next on the list of tenants that McFarlane plans to take to court for not paying rent. Though it’s a weekday, Guzman is home, and is vague on whether or not he is really supposed to be at his training session at Bellevue. His studio apartment, decorated with baseball jerseys, photographs of marijuana plants pulled from magazines, and a photo of his daughter, smells thick of marijuana. Friends drift in and out to visit and smoke cigarettes.

“This place is a comfort zone,” says one friend, who receives money for a psychiatric disability. He’s lounging on Guzman’s bed, which doubles as a couch. “It doesn’t help you at all.”

“They help you if you want to be helped,” Guzman corrects as he washes dishes. “But 25 to 75 percent of them don’t want help.”

“You know, my brother wants me to move with him to Ohio,” Guzman adds, as he drifts onto a new thought and a new plan. “That would be a new experience for me. I’ve never tried that before. Don’t get me wrong. I would love to be here five years. Well, I’m not saying love. But as long as I’m here, I have a roof over my head.”

In the end, Guzman had that roof only a few more months. Before the year was over, he became the third resident to be evicted from Louis Nine. ✖