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PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES EVALUATION PREHOUSING SITE VISIT MEMO SUMMARY

This summary offers highlights from a more detailed memo that documents the role of prehousing and its value in implementing the My First Place program. It covers:

- Goals and structure of prehousing
- Ways in which youth's program "readiness" is conceptualized, assessed and supported through prehousing activities
- Core components of prehousing, including key partnerships and the referral process, the approach and finalized curriculum for the Step It Up class, and the slating process and dynamics of the wait list
- Role of the program specialist and relationship development in prehousing

The data for the memo were drawn from an April 2011 visit by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) researchers to First Place for Youth and came from three primary sources: interviews with staff at all levels of the First Place for Youth organization; talks with staff from the human services agencies of Contra Costa, Alameda, Solano and San Francisco counties;¹ and quantitative data on Step It Up attendance and graduation rates and on the My First Place wait list.

Goals and Structure of Prehousing

The prehousing phase entails three broad purposes or functions, as identified by staff:

1. The opportunity for First Place for Youth staff to assess whether a young person is appropriate or ready for the My First Place program
2. An introduction to the My First Place program and expectations for the participants
3. Preparation for My First Place staff, including the opportunity to learn about participants' needs, strengths and challenges

The "first face of First Place for Youth" is the program specialist, who provides prehousing services. The program specialist's responsibilities include outreach, initial screening and intake, working with counties to determine participants' eligibility, conducting baseline assessments, enrolling young people in and teaching Step It Up classes, and coordinating with the regional team before a young person enters housing. These coordination activities include managing the wait list, participating in "slating," facilitating roommate meetings and scheduling the initial meetings between a young person and the youth advocate and employment and education specialist prior to move-in. By design, program specialists do not carry a traditional "caseload." Instead, the program specialist works with all young people at all stages of the prehousing process in a given county. Program specialists will make referrals but do not provide ongoing support services or case management.

¹ County social services refer, respectively, to the San Francisco Department of Human Services, the Alameda County Social Services Agency, the Contra Costa County Social Services Department and the Solano County Health and Social Services Department.

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How Readiness Is Conceptualized

When Are Young People “Ready” for the Program?

First Place for Youth staff explained that “program readiness” is not established based on a standard checklist. Young people have the opportunity during the prehousing period to demonstrate behaviors that indicate their ability to live independently. Such behaviors, according to staff with whom we spoke, include timely keeping of appointments, engaging with program staff, following program rules on attendance, appearance and conduct while in Step It Up, and generally demonstrating motivation and follow-through. First Place for Youth staff made clear that challenges faced by youth do not bar their entry to My First Place. Staff see readiness as the ability to manage challenges, as opposed to the absence of challenges.

Getting Program Staff Ready to Work With Young People

Prehousing also helps prepare staff to work effectively with the young person once he or she has entered housing. Program specialists begin sharing information about the young person with other regional staff while the young person is still in Step It Up. This process allows staff to find the most appropriate housing placement. Additionally, a young person’s baseline assessment, Step It Up portfolio and employment and education assessments give staff the tools to help the youth “hit the ground running” with case management and use the THP-Plus clock with optimal efficiency once in housing.

Assessment

While First Place for Youth uses a standardized approach to assessment, the process is also highly individualized and focuses on identifying a young person’s strengths, challenges and service needs. Throughout the prehousing process, the program specialist assesses each young person in both formal and informal ways. While baseline and other assessments have historically been conducted during prehousing, First Place for Youth’s revised prehousing flow has entailed an expanded baseline assessment, additional assessments such as the RIASEC, and more systematic collection of release-of-information forms (ROIs) and information from collateral contacts. All these changes were described as helping better prepare My First Place staff to work with the young person to address his or her service needs *before* the start of the program.

Key Community Partnerships and Referrals

In each county, First Place for Youth’s relationships with key community partners are essential to bringing young people into prehousing. Such relationships include those between First Place for Youth staff at all levels (and in all counties) and staff at county departments of Health and Human Services (DHHS). County and First Place for Youth staff described numerous relationships with other youth-serving organizations, municipalities, group homes and high schools. Young people are referred to First Place for Youth through any of three broad sources: the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), word of mouth or First Place for Youth’s many other partnerships.

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Step It Up

Step It Up is designed to meet several goals, beginning with assessment of a young person's attendance habits, literacy and other academic skills, and ability to interact with others. In addition, Step It Up introduces potential My First Place participants to the program's core components, including their responsibilities as renters, job seekers and pursuers of academic or vocational credentials. The topics covered in Step It Up continue to be largely the same as they were, including program expectations, budgeting and communication skills, managing debt and credit, setting and meeting goals, understanding the transitions framework and problem-solving.

Analysis of data from First Place for Youth's Impact Tracker system covering a 16-month period (January 2010–April 2011) indicates that 270 young people attended Step It Up, and 218 of them (81 percent) graduated. Because a number of individuals have attempted Step It Up multiple times before graduating, this proportion could continue to increase. Further analyses suggested that graduation rates were the same across counties and youth tended to graduate at the same rate regardless of whether they were male or female, parenting or not, or whether they possessed the other risk variables examined.

The Slating Process

First Place for Youth defines "slating" as matching youth in one county who are ready to move in to housing with available housing in that county. A number of factors make slating individuals for apartments a complicated endeavor. These factors include location of the apartment, housing environment (e.g., rules associated with an apartment complex or the presence of on-site building management), presence of a roommate, and in those counties with multiple funding streams, a young person's categorical eligibility for available sources of funds. All these factors are reportedly considered in combination with each eligible young person's readiness for the program and urgency of need.

The meeting at which youth are slated involves a discussion of the type of housing, location and roommate, as matched with the needs of the Step It Up graduate. Other issues discussed include the young person's strengths and challenges, as well as his or her educational and work status, various goals, relationship status (including parenting status) and current housing, along with—if relevant—criminal record and exposure to domestic violence. Much of this information is contained in a synopsis produced by the program specialist, based on impressions gleaned from the young person's experience in Step It Up. The slating process also focuses on what housing is available, and how options match up with a young person's various needs (e.g., transportation, place of employment, possible childcare). The regional manager, program specialist, youth advocate, employment and education specialist and housing specialist all play roles in the slating meeting, which typically occurs before or after a regional meeting—and when slots are set to become available.

Staff described the importance, in the slating process, of moving those with the highest need and highest risk (e.g., pregnant or parenting, lacking a connection to resources, poor education history) and more urgent need for housing (e.g., homeless) into My First Place most quickly. This effort, of course, must be balanced against categorical eligibility for and availability of

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funding. In preliminary analyses examining how quickly various Step It Up graduates are matriculated into My First Place, we looked into prehousing data based on the county office where an individual goes through prehousing,² a young person's gender and other available risk factors. Our analysis suggested two differences: (1) that young people in the Alameda office whose foster care case was in San Francisco received a spot in My First Place more quickly than did those in the Alameda office whose foster care case was in a locale other than San Francisco,³ and (2) that youth who were documented as having unstable housing were placed more quickly than those with more stable housing at the time of the assessment. No other differences among First Place for Youth regional offices, demographic differences (i.e., gender) or risk factor differences (i.e., parenting, probation) emerged from the data.

The Dynamics of the My First Place Wait List

The My First Place wait list diverges from the traditional wait list model in that individuals do not move off of it in chronological order. Instead, a host of factors influences the order in which individuals move into housing. Factors contributing to when individuals will move off the wait list are: availability of a unit for their gender and parenting status; eligibility for a particular funding stream that will cover their My First Place slot; and level of need—with those in greatest need moving most quickly from the list to housing.

First Place for Youth recently started tracking My First Place wait list durations more formally, including date entered, date left and reasons for leaving. We conducted several preliminary analyses of the wait list data we received from First Place in February 2011, including number of individuals on the wait list, length of stay on the list and what happened to them once they exited the list.

According to the information we received, 135 youth entered the My First Place wait list and stayed on it at least one day, between February 1, 2010 and February 21, 2011. The data indicate that most young people who were on the wait list in the one-year time period examined have been placed in housing, with more than one half (56 percent, or 76 individuals) entering My First Place and a small proportion (2.2 percent, or 3 individuals) going to another housing program. Over the course of the one year for which we have data, 9.6 percent (13 individuals) exited the wait list and were not placed in housing. The most common reasons for leaving the wait list before entering housing, each experienced by a small proportion (4–5 percent), were (1) a lack of follow-through with the program while on the wait list and (2) a loss of interest over time in the My First Place program. Finally, just under one third (31.8 percent) had not yet moved off the wait list, in the time frame captured.

Across all 135 youth who entered the wait list after February 1, 2010, and who spent at least one day on the wait list, we found a tremendous range—from 3 to 367 days—with an average stay of

² Using the following categories: Alameda office for young people with San Francisco foster care cases, Alameda office for young people with foster care cases in other counties, Contra Costa office and Solano office.

³ We are basing this analysis on the codes in variable name WHAT_COUNTY_HASHAD_YOUR_FOSTER_C

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90 days.⁴ For the 76 young people who moved from the wait list to My First Place by the date we received our data, the average wait list stay was 64 days, with half of the young people moving into My First Place in 50 days or fewer. For the 43 young people who had not yet left the wait list as of the date we had received the data, the average stay was 115 days. The remaining 16 youth, who most commonly exited the wait list because of lack of contact or follow-through, stayed on the list for an average of 145 days.

Role of the Program Specialist and Relationship Development in Prehousing

The My First Place program model is grounded in the relationship between youth and First Place staff. This dynamic appears to play out in three important ways during prehousing:

- The relationship between the program specialist and the young person will become the foundation for relationship development between the young person and the youth advocate.
- Program specialists use a variety of strategies to prepare young people for work with the youth advocate, but describe the increased time and resources the youth advocate can offer as crucial selling points.
- Staff appreciate how the revised prehousing flow has clearly defined staff roles, differentiating the responsibilities of the youth advocate from those of the program specialist. Staff maximize the structured opportunities to promote relationship development between the young person and the youth advocate and employment and education specialist after slating and prior to move-in.
- In addition to the formal and intentional ways in which First Place for Youth uses prehousing and the program specialist hand-off to establish relationships, relationships appear to develop between young people and My First Place staff by virtue of “space and place.”

General Impressions

- First and foremost, the revised prehousing flow, which was about to be launched when we visited in June 2010, appears to be widely accepted by staff.
- New assessments and expanded use of existing ones seems to have better prepared staff for their work once young people reach My First Place. The newly standardized Step It Up curriculum seems to have better equipped young people for My First Place.
- A working relationship between First Place for Youth and county ILSP is essential to the success of the prehousing process.

⁴ The median stay, across all individuals on the wait list, was 54 days, indicating that half the youth moved off the wait list within 54 days.

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Areas for Consideration

- As First Place for Youth considers replication of My First Place, ongoing efforts to ascertain the role of prehousing in shaping a young person's success in My First Place will remain important.
- Variation from one venue (county) to the next is certain. A key to "launching" My First Place successfully in other regions is understanding strategies for managing this inevitable variation.