

Building the Host Home Model around Chosen Family and Kin



Chapin Hall Practice Brief

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In this practice bulletin, we introduce chosen family or kinship hosting as a promising approach to the host home model. We discuss the limitations of the “stranger-match” host home model and the promise in starting with hosts who youth already know. We also highlight structural barriers that public systems and services need to tackle to effectively scale and stabilize chosen family hosting.

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Why Host Homes?

Host home programs are a promising addition to the array of housing options available to youth. Broadly, host home programs partner with community members, or hosts, who provide housing for a young person in their home. Program staff support both the host and the youth by helping to set up housing agreements, provide financial support, connect youth to other services, and mediate conflict.

One of the main benefits of the host home model is its relatively low cost compared to brick-and-mortar housing programs and the private rental market. Because youth stay in existing homes or apartments, the programs require no infrastructure investment. Housing programs that seek to place youth in private rented accommodations face the challenge of limited affordable housing options. Host homes can be geographically dispersed, and capacity can grow or shrink according to need. These factors also make the model well-suited to rural areas, which rarely have youth-centered homeless services despite having a similar rate of youth homelessness as cities and suburbs (Morton et al., 2018).

Currently, most host home programs recruit a roster of community members who agree to host youth they don't know. These volunteers are sometimes called “program-identified” or “stranger match” hosts. But some host home programs are forging a new path, rebuilding the host home model around youth's existing connections with family, chosen family, and kin. In this practice bulletin, we share some limitations of the stranger match approach and explore how a family and natural supports framework can apply to the host home model.

Limitations of the Stranger-Match Host Home Approach

The stranger-match host home approach starts from a compelling story: there are caring people in the community with spare rooms and there are youth without a place to stay—all we need to do is connect them. However, the reality of stranger-match hosting is often more complicated.

Though many people do have a spare room, getting them to agree to host a youth they don't know isn't always easy. In one study of host home programs in the U.S., providers using the stranger-match approach reported struggling to recruit hosts and spending a lot of time and energy on outreach. Many felt the demand for hosts was greater than their program could meet (VanMeeter, 2020). In evaluations of the U.K.- and Canada-based Night Stop stranger-match host home program, stakeholders reported that capacity didn't match the number of youth needing a place to stay (Insley, 2011; Sariyannis et al., 2019).

Potential youth participants may also have significant reservations about stranger-match host homes. In multiple program development processes, youth questioned the model because of its similarities to the foster care system, particularly when stranger-match hosts are paid for hosting (Schoenfeld et al., 2019; Bonlender, 2017). One study following a cohort of youth in stranger-match host home programs in California found that some youth felt pressured to choose a host who might not be ideal for them when there weren't other hosts available (Petering, 2019).

In addition to having a spare bedroom in their house, prospective stranger-match hosts are often asked to complete hours of training, fill out paperwork, and pass a background check. Some programs provide a modest stipend to hosts, but many do not (VanMeeter, 2020). These requirements, especially when there is no financial support, can be a barrier for low-income hosts and renters. These households may not have unused bedrooms in their home or spare time to navigate screening and training. Renters may be hesitant to ask the property owner to allow them to host a youth they don't know and some may have guest restrictions in their lease. Some potential hosts may be uncomfortable having a background check run and, consequently, self-select out.

A Deep Dive into Informal Shared Housing

Host home programs are one way to scaffold and support arrangements that would otherwise be informal shared housing—an umbrella term that includes doubling up, couch hopping, and couch surfing. Drawing on research evidence, a recent Chapin Hall report explores how safe and supportive informal shared housing with natural supports can be reframed as part of the solution to youth homelessness (VanMeeter, 2023).

There is no definitive data on stranger-match host demographics. However, in the U.S. study of host home programs, providers expressed concern that stranger-match hosts were often White and well-off, in contrast to many of the youth they served (VanMeeter, 2020). An organizational report on the Minnesota host home program ConneQT (formerly the GLBT Host Home program) found that power imbalance and cultural mismatch sometimes got in the way of stranger-match hosting relationships (Simões & Adam, 2017).

Applying the Family and Natural Supports Framework to the Host Home Model

Some host home programs approach host recruitment differently, through a family and natural supports lens. This means celebrating and finding resources to be youths’ informal supports, like family, chosen family, friends, mentors, and others. The family and natural supports approach was first articulated by a Canadian coalition of research and practice organizations, and now informs coordinated efforts to prevent and address youth homelessness in Canada (The Change Collective, 2019). Table 1., drawn from a 2019 Change Collective report, contrasts current norms in youth services with the natural supports approach.

Table 1. What’s Different about a Natural Supports Approach?¹

Status Quo Approach	Natural Supports Approach
Our first instinct is to meet every need with a professional support.	We actively seek out and draw on resources and assets within the youth’s support network.
We attend to basic physical needs first (food, shelter, clothing), and consider relational/social emotional needs later.	We treat the need for connection with the same urgency as physical needs (and we don’t assume we can meet that need ourselves).
We protect the youth by limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.	We recognize the limits of our power and know that youth will often maintain a connection with people [who] we do not consider positive or healthy. Instead of forbidding contact, we build youth capacity to set boundaries and keep themselves safe.
We focus solely on the youth—their needs, their perspectives, their goals.	We work with youth in the context of their natural supports, seeking to strengthen the capacity of those within [their] network to support the needs and goals of the youth.

¹ Excerpt from The Change Collective (2019).

The family and natural supports framework is a good fit for host homes, because many youth are already staying informally with someone they know (Curry et al., 2017). Others can identify adults in their lives they can rely on, some of whom may be willing to offer housing (Dang et al., 2014; De la Haye et al., 2012; Gaetz et al., 2016). Some host home programs build on this foundation by working with hosts who youth identify as natural supports and formalizing shared housing arrangements. These are sometimes called kinship or chosen family host homes.²

The kinship host home model rejects the assumption that because youth don't have a stable place to stay, they don't know any people who might be willing to house them. Programs identify, affirm, and resource youths' natural supports to foster both housing stability and permanent connections. Kinship hosting also recognizes that sometimes caring adults in a youth's network want to offer hospitality but are themselves struggling with financial difficulties, rental housing restrictions, or other barriers (VanMeeter et al., 2022). Rather than pulling youth away from that connection and placing them with a host they don't know, the service provider helps make the hosting arrangement work.

Choosing to integrate kinship hosting into the host home model requires more than just flipping a switch. The host recruitment approach has ripple effects on other aspects of the host home program, from host training to the program timeline (VanMeeter, 2020). It also requires confronting significant structural barriers, like lease guest policies, benefits cliffs, and housing benefits restrictions³—all of which have greater impacts on underestimated and under-resourced communities of color (Creamer, 2020; Kuebler, 2013). In Table 2, we present an overview of programmatic and structural differences between the stranger-match and kinship/chosen family host home models.

Given these challenges, a stranger-match program may seem to represent the path of least resistance. But to begin to address racial disparities in youth homelessness, we must grapple with the structural inequities that erode community housing resilience. The kinship or chosen family host home model is a step in that direction.

Conclusion

Increasingly, nonprofit organizations and Continuums of Care are looking to the host home model for a flexible, affordable housing option for youth facing homelessness. But too often, we overlook the informal shared housing that is already happening. The kinship or chosen family host home model allows service providers to house youth with people they know and trust. The host home model must adapt to meet the needs of these natural supports, especially renters and those relying on public benefits. But if done successfully, we can make progress toward both addressing youth homelessness and strengthening the informal community of support youth need to thrive in the long term.

² See, for example: <https://www.seattlemca.org/blog/what-are-host-homes-and-who-eligible>; <https://closeknit.us/chosen-family-justice/>

³ Chapin Hall released a toolkit outlining how program stipends for youth impact public benefits and eligibility (Berger Gonzales et al., 2022). These are relevant to chosen family and kinship hosts, as well.

Table 2. Comparing the Stranger-Match and Kinship/Chosen Family Host Home Models^a

	Stranger-Match Host Homes (also called program-match host homes)	Kinship/Chosen Family Host Homes (also called youth-identified or youth-initiated host homes)
Programmatic differences^b		
Host recruitment	Program staff recruit and vet the host.	Youth identify their host or enter the program already staying informally with a host.
Hosting requirements	Prospective hosts are often required to pass a background check, have a spare room in their home, and have time to go through required training.	Given the pre-existing relationship, programs are often more flexible with hosting requirements. Program staff help the youth assess the health of the relationship and may request the host undergo a background check.
Host demographics	Because of recruitment methods, program requirements, and host support, hosts may be more likely to be homeowners, White, or middle-class. Some administrators observe a race or class mismatch between hosts and youth (Simões & Adam, 2017).	Because of segregation in our social networks, kin or chosen family hosts are more likely to share youth’s racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background (McPherson et al., 2001). In turn, since youth of color and youth from low-income households are more likely to face homelessness (Morton et al., 2018), youth-identified hosts are more likely renters, people of color, or low-income.
Host support	Programs require extensive training, often introductions to homelessness, anti-racism, and LGBTQ-friendliness. Programs may or may not provide financial support to hosts.	Programs may not require preparatory training, instead tailoring support to individual host and youth needs as they arise. Programs are more likely to provide financial support to hosts and help renters address barriers to hosting.
Geographic issues	Due to host demographics and patterns of residential segregation (Bischoff & Reardon, 2013; Mitchell & Franco, 2018), in some communities, hosts are less likely to live in youths’ home neighborhoods.	If the youth is a new arrival to the area, their support network may live elsewhere. In some cases, programs provide travel funds to help youth reconnect to their support network.

Programmatic differences (continued)

Capacity and scalability	Programs spend significant time and resources on recruitment, but often struggle to find enough hosts. However, most programs across the U.S. currently use the stranger-match approach.	Youth come into the program with a host or can identify one, reducing host recruitment burden. Though there are fewer of them, chosen family host home programs have greater potential scalability. However, increasing capacity requires addressing policy issues that curtail the generosity of informal hosts, particularly if they are renters.
Impact on permanent connections	There is no formal expectation that the hosting relationship continue and youth are encouraged to exit the program into other housing. Programs do not require hosts to stay connected with a youth after the hosting arrangement ends.	Successful exits from the program may include youth continuing to stay with their host. As natural supports, hosts are expected and encouraged to stay connected to the youth after program participation ends, sometimes as a continued housing option.

Structural differences

Narrative	The stranger-match model is consistent with existing narratives: couch hopping is dangerous, and because youth are on their own, volunteers with a spare room need to step in to fill the gap. ^c	This kinship/chosen family model introduces a counter-narrative: youth often have natural supports who can give them a place to stay (Curry et al., 2021). However, their hospitality is undermined by structural racism and economic inequities that destabilize families and limit BIPOC home ownership (VanMeeter et al., 2022).
Normative	Stranger-match hosting, like stranger-match mentoring, is a relatively new but established part of the formal nonprofit sector. Hosts get to be the “heroes,” which reinforces the idea that youth (often from BIPOC and low-income communities) need to be saved by (often White) people with power and resources. ^d	Informal hosting is an under-the-radar norm in BIPOC, immigrant, poor, queer, and rural cultures (Generations United, 2021; Pilkauskas et al., 2014; Stack, 1974). Outside those spheres, informal hosts are rarely celebrated and informal shared housing is often assumed to be unstable or unsafe (Beekman et al., 2021; Bill Wilson Center, 2017; Holtschneider, 2021).

Structural differences (continued)

Race equity	Because low-income and BIPOC hosts may face barriers to participating, resources are largely directed to privileged communities.	Chosen family hosting invests in youth's natural supports and the people who are already informally hosting. This may direct funds to BIPOC and other under-resourced communities.
Structural change	Stranger-match hosting can operate within the current system.	The kinship/chosen family host home approach requires system change to address hosts' housing barriers and benefits cliffs, which disproportionately affect BIPOC communities (VanMeeter et al., 2022).

^a Adapted from a resource published by CloseKnit (2023).

^b The programmatic differences between these models are based on findings from a descriptive study of host home programs in the U.S. (VanMeeter, 2020). Other references are listed where relevant.

^c See, for example: <https://patch.com/illinois/parkridge/harbour-launches-new-host-home-program-homeless-youth>; <https://shipfrederick.com/thrive-host-home-program/>

^d The "white-savior industrial complex" was first articulated by Teju Cole (2012) to describe toxic patterns of charity and volunteerism, primarily by White tourists in African countries. The concept has since been applied to similar power dynamics in urban teaching and other youth work (Kann & McCloskey, 2015; Sondel, Kretchmar & Dunn, 2019).

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CloseKnit is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Minnesota building a holistic response to youth homelessness that honors and invests in existing "chosen family" arrangements. Our breakthrough approach sees all youth facing homelessness as already loved, including youth from underestimated and under-resourced communities. Through research, training and advocacy, we work to shift the mindset of policy makers and community partners to champion racially equitable solutions for youth and their caring support networks. Visit www.closeknit.us to learn more.

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