



Creating Home in Community

Reframing and Resourcing Informal Shared Housing with Chosen Family and Kin as Part of the Solution to Youth Homelessness

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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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Introduction

Youth and young adults facing homelessness¹ may be “on their own,” but they also often have mentors, kin, chosen family, or other valued relationships in their lives (Dang et al., 2014; De la Haye et al., 2012; Gaetz et al., 2016). For all youth, the presence of these positive informal relationships—also known as natural supports²—is critical to well-being and successful transitions to adulthood (Bowers et al., 2015; Van Dam et al., 2018). But for youth facing homelessness, natural supports can form a housing safety net by giving youth a place to stay when living with a parent or guardian, or independently, are not viable options.

We know that youth facing homelessness do rely on informal shared housing.³ In the U.S., over half of young adults ages 18 to 25 and one quarter of unaccompanied minors facing homelessness couch surf without other stable housing over the course of a year (Morton et al., 2018). Not all those situations are safe or comfortable, and it is critical that all youth in informal shared housing have access to youth

homeless services and educational supports (Beekman et al., 2021; Bill Wilson Center, 2017; Holtschneider, 2021). That being said, there is emerging evidence that youth sometimes stay with supportive, caring adults (Curry et al., 2021). These informal hosts can play a role in promoting youth wellbeing, housing stability, and other core outcomes.

Informal hosts have to navigate increased household costs, relational challenges, lease guest policies, and benefit restrictions—all without formal support.



However, informal shared housing with natural supports—when safe and comfortable—is under-recognized and under-resourced. Most homeless services are not designed to stabilize youth in short-term informal shared housing, while youth in longer-term arrangements rarely qualify for homeless services and aren’t considered in discussions of homelessness prevention (Curry et al., 2017). Informal hosts have to navigate increased household costs, relational challenges, lease guest policies, and benefit restrictions—all without formal support (VanMeeter et al., 2022). In some cases, informal hosts choose to put their own housing or financial stability at risk in order to provide youth with a safe place to stay.

The gap in support for informal hosts is also a racial justice issue. For one, youth of color are both more likely to face housing instability and more likely to couch hop than their peers (Morton et al., 2018; Petry et al., 2022).

¹This report uses the term “youth facing homelessness” to refer to young people ages 13 to 25 who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian and lack a regular, stable nighttime residence. This includes youth who couch surf, couch hop, and double up, following the broadest federal definition of homelessness used by the U.S. Department of Education (The Public Health and Welfare Part B: Education for Homeless Children and Youths, 2020), and the many youth who experience homelessness while pregnant or parenting (Dworsky et al., 2018).

²The term “natural support” was first used by Nisbet and Hagner (1988) to describe the role of family and community in the wellbeing of youth with developmental disabilities. It has since been applied to other fields of practice and research, including youth homelessness.

³“Informal shared housing” refers to accommodations where a youth is a guest and is neither a dependent or spouse of their host nor listed on a lease. This includes shorter term situations that are sometimes called couch hopping, couch surfing, or doubling up.

In addition, because of systematic exclusion from home ownership and economic opportunity, households of color are more likely to be renters, low-income, and recipients of public benefits (Creamer, 2020; Kuebler, 2013; Yun et al., 2022; Desmond, 2016; Taylor, 2019; Townsley et al., 2021; Broady et al., 2021). These are all factors that can make it harder to provide stability in informal shared housing.

Nationally, we have committed to making youth homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring (USICH, 2018; Chapin Hall, n.d.). To reach that goal, we need to think more broadly about prevention. Building on

research evidence and examples from the field, this report reframes safe informal shared housing with natural supports as a community-based, scaleable form of housing for youth facing homelessness.

At the same time, we recognize that inequities in housing, employment, and service access impact informal hosts' ability to provide youth with stable housing. By putting these challenges in context and highlighting the power of connection, we hope to spark a wider conversation about how policy and public systems can strengthen the community of care youth need to thrive.

Informal Shared Housing and Definitions of Homelessness

In this report, we focus on informal shared housing where youth feel safe and supported. However, like any kind of housing, informal shared housing can end up being short-term, long-term, and anywhere in between. As a result, youth in informal shared housing with natural supports are sometimes eligible for homeless services—depending on the relevant federal definition of homelessness, the number of moves they've made recently, and the specific circumstances of their housing (Curry et al., 2017). For example:

- ▶ A youth who is staying with one informal host for months or years may not qualify as homeless under any federal definition of homelessness (Curry et al., 2017). Some long-term informal hosts and guests could benefit from homelessness prevention services, but these programs tend to focus on youth living in their home of origin, with limited attention to youth staying with kin or chosen family.⁹
- ▶ A youth who stays with an informal host for a few weeks or nights, moving between different households or other accommodations, would likely be eligible for homeless services under the U. S. Department of Education and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) definitions. Under the HUD definition, the youth would be eligible only in certain narrow circumstances (Curry et al., 2017). Some host home programs, especially those funded through RHYA, help stabilize safe and supportive informal shared housing. However, funding for and awareness of this approach is limited.

We support ongoing efforts to institute a more inclusive federal definition of youth homelessness, so that all youth and young adults who are displaced can access the supports they need to achieve their goals (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023; SchoolHouse Connection, 2023). For some youth, this could mean investing in positive informal shared housing as a path toward stability.

⁹ The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), for example, describes youth homelessness prevention as “family interventions that can address and reduce family conflict and ensure youth remain connected to or reunify with their families, when safe and appropriate” (2015, p. 4).

Youth facing homelessness often have caring adults in their lives.

How can we strengthen their informal communities of support?

Interdependence in Early Adulthood

Interdependence is a normal and positive part of adolescence and the transition to adulthood, but our current youth homeless service system tends to miss youths' wider networks of support. In the U.S., self-reliance and independence are values that shape how we measure successful progress toward adulthood (Arnett, 2001; Arnett, 2003; Seltzer et al., 2012). But for most youth and young adults, interdependence is a fact of life. It is normative for youth under 18 to be dependents, but most youth 18 to 25 still rely on parents or guardians for support. In 2021, more than one half (58%) of young adults ages 18 to 24 lived with a parent or guardian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). We also know that in 2018, 79% of 18- to 34-year-olds received financial assistance from a parent or guardian, and over one-third of that help was for housing costs (Merrill Lynch & Age Wave, 2020).

Supportive relationships pave the way toward stability and lifelong well-being for all young people. This is no less the case for youth facing homelessness. Studies have found that for youth facing homelessness, social support from family, chosen family, and other natural supports can reduce the negative health impacts of stressful life events, improve social emotional resilience, and, critically, pave the way toward housing stability (Unger et al., 1998; Dang et al., 2014; Kelly, 2020; Milburn et al., 2009; Mallett et al., 2009; Mayock et al., 2011; Shelton, 2016; Harper et al., 2015). At the same time, many youth facing homelessness have experienced

family conflict, the death of a caregiver, or separation due to involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems (Samuels et al., 2019; Morton et al., 2018). Disconnection from family and disrupted relationships are central to the stories youth carry with them.

Given this reality, programs sometimes start from the assumption that youth facing homelessness need to make it on their own, especially as they approach age 18. Transitional living programs aim to foster independent living skills and rapid rehousing programs focus on helping youth overcome barriers to securing and maintaining a lease (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2021; HUD Exchange, n.d.). Street outreach programs are tasked with building youth relationships with outreach staff “to move youth into stable housing and prepare them for independence” (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2020).

Equipping youth with the skills and resources they need to achieve their goals is crucial. Yet too often, youth’s family, chosen family, and larger community are left on the sidelines.⁴ This sets up a double standard: youth facing homelessness are expected to exit programs and achieve independence, while their more stably housed peers fall back on a network of family and natural supports throughout early adulthood.

⁴ Notably, youth homeless services and prevention programs for minors, including Basic Center Programs funded through FYSB, often prioritize family connection and reunification (FYSB, 2020). These programs do have an opportunity to more widely integrate chosen family, kin, and natural supports in their approach to family.

Also, despite significant disconnection, youth facing homelessness often already have or actively seek out relationships with family, chosen family, and other natural supports. Most youth facing homelessness can identify someone—often family or chosen family—who could provide financial or social support (Dang et al., 2014; De la Haye et al., 2012; Gaetz et al., 2016). In a Canadian study of youth facing homelessness, over 70% of youth surveyed stayed in touch with at least one family member and over three quarters wanted to improve family relationships (Gaetz et al., 2016). In the Voices of Youth Count interviews, youth often described prioritizing relationships over residential stability, including leaving formal housing services to seek closer connection to friends, family, and chosen family (Samuels et al., 2021).

The Family and Natural Supports Approach

Social services and public systems can be designed to strengthen youth connections to family, kin, and natural supports. We all depend on other people in big and small ways—family, neighbors, friends, and strangers. However, our ability to help each other out can be constrained by time and resources, which are in turn shaped by our access to employment, education, and housing. Further, racism in policy and public systems means these opportunities are not equally distributed. So, how can we design policies, programs, and public systems with interdependence in mind?

The Canadian youth homeless service system and the shift in the U.S. child welfare system toward kinship care are two important reference points. In each of these cases, public systems have made significant changes to prioritize youth connection to family and natural supports. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and their partners across

Canada have been trailblazers, applying a family and natural supports lens to their youth homelessness prevention and early intervention work.

The family and natural supports approach means identifying, resourcing, strengthening, and celebrating youths' positive informal connections.



Briefly, the family and natural supports approach means identifying, resourcing, strengthening, and celebrating youths' positive informal connections. Below, we share a table from The Change Collective (2019), a coalition of Canadian organizations, describing key distinguishing features of the natural supports approach from a practice perspective.

The COH has published evaluations of programs across Canada confirming that services can play a role in strengthening youth's connections to family and natural supports (Sage-Passant, 2019; Main & Ledene, 2019; Ward, 2019). Youth Reconnect, a family- and natural supports-focused prevention program, reported positive impacts on youth relationships with family and an associated reduction in the number of youth accessing emergency and formal housing services (Caplan et al., 2020; Borato & Ecker, 2021). Across the Making the Shift youth homelessness demonstration programs, which are informed by the family and natural supports framework, 70% of participants reported improved family relations (Borato et al., n.d.).

The U.S. child welfare system has also increasingly shifted toward family and natural supports through formal and informal kinship care, where youth live with relatives or other trusted adults rather than in congregate care or a foster home with people they don't know.

What's Different About a Natural Supports Approach? [A guide for service providers]

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.

*From The Change Collective, 2019

The positive impacts of this change are significant: youth in formal kinship care benefit from improved well-being, permanency, and cultural connectedness compared to peers in congregate and foster care (Epstein, 2017). Kinship navigation services and financial support programs have been found to have positive impacts on youth permanency (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Ringel et al., 2017; Schmidt & Treinen, 2017; Wheeler & Vollet, 2017). Recognizing that family and natural supports can play a critical role in prevention, the recent Family First Prevention Services Act extended access to kinship care (Family-FirstAct.org, n.d.).

This body of work on interdependence suggests that informal supports have an important role to play in promoting youth well-being and stability. Given this, public

systems should prioritize social connectedness with the same urgency as housing, to ensure youth have healthy relationships with people they can turn to for advice, help, and—when needed—housing. That also means paying attention to and addressing the family- and community-level challenges that get in the way of a strong informal safety net.

In short, we need to start thinking about the formal service array as just one part of our approach to preventing and addressing youth homelessness. Regardless of where youth facing homelessness choose to live, we need to design programs and supports that help youth form strong, informal support networks. Shifts in Canadian youth homelessness efforts and the U.S. child welfare system show that this transformation is possible.

Some youth stay with people they trust, and even when the arrangement is short-term, it can be safe and positive.

How can we help stabilize informal shared housing with natural supports, so these arrangements can last longer when needed?

Informal Shared Housing as Low Cost, Community-Based Option

Informal shared housing can come with significant financial and social upsides. The U.S. is in the midst of an ongoing affordable housing crisis (Aurand et al., 2022). In 2019, almost half of renters and just over a quarter of homeowners were burdened by housing costs, spending 30% or more of their income on housing (Martinez & Mather, 2022). Eligible families wait two and a half years on average to access Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers; nationally, 4.4 million families are on waiting lists for public housing or voucher

programs (Acosta & Gartland, 2021; Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation, 2016).

In this context, informal shared housing is one widely available affordable housing option, for people of all ages. Guests can generally secure housing more easily and cheaply through informal networks than through the private rental market. This is especially the case for guests who have poor credit, little or no rental history, issues with a background check, prior evictions, language barriers, or limited cash for a security deposit. Informal shared housing is also a way to avoid staying in other less desirable or safe situations like emergency shelter, staying in a vehicle, or going without shelter.



Defining Permanent Connections

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) has identified “permanent connections” as one of the four federal outcomes for ending youth homelessness, alongside stable housing, social and emotional well-being, and employment or education. However, there is no standard definition of who and what counts as a permanent connection.

As federal agencies establish a shared definition of permanent connections, they have the opportunity to shift focus toward supportive informal relationships embedded in community (VanMeeter, 2023).

Read [*Defining permanent connections to center and strengthen informal supports*](#)

The low barriers to informal shared housing are especially important for youth, who have limited or no access to the private rental market (SchoolHouse Connection, 2022). Some studies have also found that youth underutilize or express hesitance about formal housing services, particularly when youth- and LGBTQ-specific options aren't available (Samuels et al., 2018; Côté & Blais, 2019; Prock & Kennedy, 2020). Informal shared housing, when it is safe and supportive, offers a low-cost, community-based housing option.

Research on adult-headed households has confirmed that informal shared housing can have social and economic benefits for both hosts and guests. Informal shared housing can spread out child rearing and elder care responsibilities, which might otherwise prevent caregivers from pursuing education or employment (Generations United, 2021; Montes & Halterman, 2011; Brady, 2016). Guests sometimes contribute financially, such as helping to pay for rent or other household costs. These economic and caregiving considerations were the most cited reasons for sharing housing in one survey of multigenerational households (Generations United, 2021). Other research has similarly found that informal shared housing, multigenerational or otherwise, can reduce financial hardship for both hosts and guests (Pilkauskas et al., 2014; Mykyta & Pilkauskas, 2016).

Informal shared housing can also be a first-choice option. For some communities, multigenerational housing aligns with cultural values and social expectations. In these families, informal shared housing may be preferred over independent or single-family living, regardless of financial circumstances (Chen et al., 2015). Some studies suggest that the western "nuclear family" contributes to isolation and consumes more resources than shared

housing. Some of these authors propose multigenerational and multifamily living as a more sustainable and socially integrated option for all (Dove, 2020; Graham Niederhouse & Graham, 2013; Shin, 2012).

In contrast, very little research has been done on the potential benefits of informal shared housing for guests ages 13 to 25. One exploratory study of informal adult hosts and youth guests found the arrangements were largely safe and supportive. Many hosts and youth also described the relationships as familial (Curry et al., 2021). Several studies of foster care alumni have found that many actively seek out informal shared housing within their kin network as part of an effort to reconnect with family. When that isn't possible, they rely on friends and romantic partners for places to stay (Perez & Romo, 2011; Shirk & Strangler, 2004).

Informal shared housing can reduce financial hardship for both hosts and guests.



Informal shared housing may be particularly important for Black and LGBTQ+ youth, who are more likely to couch hop and face greater barriers in formal housing programs than their peers (Petry et al., 2022).⁵ And for unmarried pregnant or parenting youth, who are twice as likely as their peers to face homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2018), informal shared housing could help ease childcare responsibilities and costs.

⁵ Black youth face longer waits to access housing programs (Morton et al., 2019) and are more likely to exit rapid rehousing programs (Hsu et al., 2021) than non-Black peers. LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to report facing stigma- and discrimination-related barriers to accessing homeless services (Coolhart & Brown, 2017).

Challenges in Shared Housing and Opportunities for Support

Informal shared households face interpersonal, financial, and structural challenges that could be addressed through outside support and system change. Despite the potential benefits, informal shared housing can also come with risks, instability, and costs. Research to date on youth in informal shared housing has demonstrated these downsides, largely in short-term arrangements (Beekman et al., 2021; Hail-Jares, Vichta-Ohlsen, Butler, et al., 2021; Hail-Jares, Vichta-Ohlsen & Nash, 2021; Holtschneider, 2021; McLoughlin, 2013; Thielking et al., 2015). One study of couch-hopping youth in short-term arrangements found that 70% were facing “very high” levels of psychological distress, and that multiple couch hopping stays over the course of a month was associated with higher levels of stress (Hail-Jares, Vichta-Ohlsen, Butler, et al., 2021). An Australian study of youth in short-term couch surfing situations highlighted the dislocation and lack of housing security youth face (McLoughlin, 2013).

When youth describe informal shared housing arrangements as unsafe or unsupported, it is critical they get help securing other housing. But when the host is a natural support and the arrangement is safe, we can instead frame challenges and barriers as opportunities to work toward stability.

Interpersonal Barriers

Interpersonal difficulty can impact both informal hosts and guests. One study of doubled up adult-headed households found that guests sometimes lacked privacy, independence, or adequate living space (Skobba & Goetz, 2014). Another study found that individuals in multigenerational households were more likely to report stress in their relationships when guests faced behavioral health challenges (Wagstaff & Gale, 2019).

Informal shared housing can be precarious because of its informality. Because there is no lease or sublease agreement, hosts can ask a guest to leave at any time. Hosts have the final say in how long guests stay and the terms of their housing, including asking for rent or other household contributions.

Centering Chosen Family and Kin in the Host Home Model

Host homes are one promising place where the family and natural supports approach to informal shared housing could take root. Host home programs partner with community members, who provide housing for a young person in their home.

Most host home programs currently recruit volunteer hosts who are paired with youth they don't know. But some are using a different approach, building on youths' existing support networks. Chapin Hall released a bulletin summarizing the differences between these approaches and the benefits of the chosen family or kinship hosting model (VanMeeter & White, 2023).

Read [*Building the host home model around chosen family and kin*](#)



This flexibility can benefit hosts, but it leaves guests without formal protections. One study of adult-headed households found that long-term guests were often expected to contribute financially or otherwise to the household, which was a barrier for very low-income guests (Skobba & Goetz, 2014). This power imbalance can impact guests' ability to set boundaries, resolve disagreements, and plan for the future (Harvey, 2020; Harvey et al., 2021; Thielking et al., 2015).



Social services can play a role in preventing and mediating the relational challenges youth and their informal hosts face.

Social services can play a role in preventing and mediating the relational challenges youth and informal hosts face. Family strengthening and reconnection programs have shown promise in helping youth navigate and strengthen relationships – mostly with parents and guardians (Harper et al., 2015; Pergamit et al., 2016; Ward, 2019; Winland et al., 2011). These prevention and early intervention services could expand their scope to include youth staying with kin, chosen family, and other intergenerational natural supports.

Host home programs help formalize and support shared housing arrangements, but most only work with hosts youth don't already know (VanMeeter, 2020). Given that youth often know a potential host, more programs should explore a kinship or chosen family hosting approach. Some host home programs using this approach are funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), as Basic Center Programs.⁶ Adequate funding for youth homeless services through RHYA and building awareness of kinship or chosen family hosting are important steps toward scaling up the model.

⁶ See, for example: Valley Youth House, 2020.

Financial and Structural Barriers

Some informal hosts face financial and housing challenges that impact their ability to provide a youth with stable housing. Informal hosting generally comes with increased food and utility costs, which may strain the household budget. Leases often restrict guest stays to a couple of weeks and prevent renters from setting up a sublease. These restrictions force renters to operate under the radar if they want to informally host (VanMeeter et al., 2022).

Public housing and other public benefits programs also penalize informal hosting. The federal Housing Choice Voucher program does not allow occupants outside of registered family members (Stricker, 2012; Housing and Urban Development, 2006a; Housing and Urban Development, 2006b). In some cases, informal hosts may be in violation of these rules or miss the deadline to formally add a youth to their household. If found out, public housing agencies can permanently revoke hosts' benefits.

Some benefits programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, may include hosted youth as part of the household when determining eligibility (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2021).⁷ If a hosted youth has income or the host gets outside financial help for hosting from a formal program, the host could hit a "benefits cliff"—reducing or losing their benefits.

⁷ Medicaid only counts co-resident non-dependent youth as part of the household if they are 21 or younger, have lived with their host for more than half the year, and are related to their host—such as a nephew, niece, grandchild, or sibling (Healthcare.gov, n.d.; In the Loop, n.d.).

These financial and structural barriers don't affect all informal hosts equally. Because of historic and ongoing exclusion from home ownership and economic opportunity, Black, Indigenous, and other households of color are more likely to live in rented housing and to rely on public benefits (Creamer, 2020; Kuebler, 2013; Yun et al., 2022; Desmond, 2016; Taylor, 2019; Townsley et al., 2021; Broady et al., 2021). Youth of color are more likely to be unstably housed (Morton et al., 2018), and Black and other non-Hispanic youth of color are more likely to couch hop (Petry et al., 2022). In other words, communities of color are informally sharing their housing, but are also more likely to face financial and housing instability as a result.

Policymakers, public agencies, and social services all have a role to play in mitigating instability. One resource from CloseKnit (2021) provides an overview of structural

changes necessary to address the barriers facing hosts who renter or receive public housing and other benefits. One key policy change is "good neighbor" renter protections that give renter hosts a buffer period against eviction. This would make it easier for renters to bring informal hosting arrangements above board. Public agencies should also explore building exceptions into public benefits policies for informal hosts of youth who would otherwise be unhoused.

From the service side, concrete supports could address the financial barriers to hosting. Rapid rehousing and direct cash transfer programs have shown promise in helping youth overcome financial barriers to stable housing. These program models could intentionally integrate informal or formal shared housing with natural supports as a stable housing option.



Where Do We Go From Here?

Informal shared housing is an important part of the story of youth homelessness in the U.S. This report highlighted a body of research that casts new light on informal shared housing and youth's natural support network. Not all informal shared housing is safe. But when it is, youth at risk of or experiencing housing instability can benefit from living with people they know and trust. In that context, informal shared housing could be reimagined as an opportunity for investment, to both prevent and mitigate instability and strengthen youths' permanent connections.

We hope that this new framework inspires service approaches and public system investments that place a caring community at the heart of solutions to youth homelessness. There is a lot more to learn about the role of informal shared housing in youth experiences of homelessness, but there are steps we can take now to move the field forward.

Celebrate and Center Community Care

- ▶ The stories we tell and the language we use matters. At every level, from providers to policy makers, we should **elevate successful paths to adulthood that include interdependence**. These narratives can destigmatize informal shared housing and other kinds of mutual aid.
- ▶ The four federal outcomes for addressing youth homelessness shape how programs are designed and evaluated. Federal agencies should **implement a definition of permanent and positive connection that explicitly centers family, chosen family and kin, and intergenerational natural supports**.

Design Services to Invest in Natural Supports

- ▶ The family and natural supports approach calls on youth homeless services to **reimagine themselves as allies to youth's natural supports, working collaboratively with youth and the people they care about**.
- ▶ Youth facing homelessness should have the option of living with an adult they know and trust. To that end, youth homeless services should **integrate informal shared housing with natural supports into existing program models** like host home, rapid rehousing, and direct cash transfer.
- ▶ Youth staying with an informal host long term are often not eligible for homeless services until the arrangement has started to fall apart. USICH should **promote homelessness prevention models that include youth in long-term informal shared housing**, so that youth and informal hosts can access resources before a crisis happens.



More resources

Through their Chosen Family Justice Initiative, Minnesota-based CloseKnit has released a set of resources on stabilizing informal hosting. This includes guides for direct support, like a shared housing agreement form, and legal analyses charting a path toward public system change.

[Learn more](#)

Remove Structural Barriers to Stability for Informal Hosts⁸

- ▶ Informal hosts who rent their housing may choose to offer youth hospitality, even when it puts them in violation of guest policies on their lease. Policy makers should **explore options for protecting renters' right to informally host, like "Good Neighbor" laws that give renter hosts a buffer against eviction.**
- ▶ Public housing benefit recipients face significant risks when they informally host youth, including losing their housing and permanently losing benefits. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in partnership with local public housing agencies, should **revise household composition restrictions for public housing beneficiaries with informal hosting in mind, including expanding legal definitions of family.**

⁸ Policy recommendations are drawn from the CloseKnit (2022) analysis of policy and administrative levers for addressing barriers to informal hosting.

- ▶ Programs that aim to support informal hosts often provide financial help to cover increased utilities and food costs. Youth may also be employed while a member of the household. These changes to household income and composition can affect eligibility for benefits programs like TANF and SNAP. Public agencies should **address the household income benefits cliffs** (Berger Gonzales et al., 2022) and **add flexibility to household composition notification requirements**, both of which currently disincentivize hosts from bringing arrangements above board.

Youth often come through the doors of a social service agency alone. But behind them, there is a wider support network of mentors, cheerleaders, allies, neighbors, chosen family, kin and others. These natural supports can have a positive impact on a youth's ability to thrive. It's time for all policies and programs aimed at addressing youth homelessness to recognize how communities are already caring for these youth. When the households that informally and safely house youth are seen as potential allies in youth homelessness prevention, we can pursue policy changes, supports, and services to help them provide youth with a more stable launch pad to adulthood.

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