

Defining Permanent Connections to Center and Strengthen Informal Supports

Chapin Hall Policy Brief

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This policy brief examines permanent connections, one of the four federal outcomes for youth facing homelessness. We make a case for defining permanent connection around informal relationships and highlight the systemic shifts needed to put this definition into practice.

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THE ISSUE

In the Obama-era Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) established four core outcomes for youth facing homelessness: “stable housing,” “education and employment,” “permanent connections,” and “social emotional well-being” (USICH, 2013, p. 15). Any effort to address youth homelessness should be evaluated across these four areas (Morton et al., 2019). To do that, we need a shared understanding of each core outcome and benchmarks for positive impact.

Currently, definitions of “permanent connection” vary across federal agencies. In the Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness, the USICH described permanent connections as: “ongoing attachments to families, communities, schools, and other positive social networks” (2013, p. 15). This definition is used by the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (n.d.) and is adapted in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (1978) definition. In contrast, a report prepared for Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center (RHYTTAC) defines it as: “establishing lasting social and community supports through connections with healthy, positive role models, mentors, and peers” (Gray Matters Technology Services, 2021, p.5).

Even small differences in definitions can impact how organizations recognize and track permanent connections. In particular, the kinds of relationships we include as permanent connections will fundamentally shape the kinds of relational supports we offer to youth and how we measure success.

The USICH and RHYTTAC definitions listed above both include informal relationships, like family and mentors. But the USICH definition also mentions connections to paid staff and institutions such as schools. Formal resources can and do play an important role in the lives of youth facing homelessness. However, they are time-limited by nature. Nonprofit staff turn over, teachers change schools, and youth graduate and exit programs.

Some research has found that the pattern of lost relationships with paid staff and volunteers can negatively impact youth well-being and their willingness to form new connections (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; McGuiness-Carmichael, 2019). Although youth workers and teachers can become lifelong connections for some youth, they cannot be a long-term support for all the youth with whom they work. Further, connection to school and work is already covered in the education and employment core outcome area.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Public agencies and USICH need to establish a consistent definition of “permanent connection” to help organizations and evaluators make sense of this core outcome. As part of that process, they have an opportunity to rethink what kinds of relationships should be at the heart of permanent connection.

Youth need strong informal support networks that are not dependent on school enrollment, program participation, or eligibility for services.¹ Many youth facing homelessness have experienced the loss of or estrangement from a parent or caregiver (Samuels et al, 2019), while still having meaningful positive connections with chosen family and kin (Quilty & Norris, 2022; Toro et al., 2007, p 20). Given these facts, an intergenerational lens and expansive framing of “family” are warranted.

We recommend that public agencies adopt a definition of permanent connection that prioritizes individual, informal relationships with natural supports, especially intergenerational connections. Federal agencies should also take steps to expand definitions of family in their guidance on measuring permanent connection, to capture meaningful relationships with extended kinship networks and chosen family.

It will take more than a shared definition of permanent connections to ensure youth-serving organizations design, implement, and evaluate services with informal, intergenerational relationships in mind. Rather than acting as youths’ primary supports, service providers need to embrace a bridging role. In this role, providers would work to bolster youths’ informal relationships, which can help youth thrive long term.²

Public agencies should adopt a definition of permanent connection that centers individual, informal relationships with natural supports, especially intergenerational connections.

¹ Borato et al. (2020) have articulated the importance of this shift in Canada, where family and natural supports is a pillar of the youth homelessness prevention approach. Similarly, grantees of the Administration for Children and Families Youth At-Risk of Homelessness program reported the “importance of youth strengthening relationships with natural supports to help them achieve long-term stability” (Keith et al., p. 24).

² The “Relationship Building Continuum” resource from CloseKnit (2023) further explores this paradigm shift toward natural supports in service provision.

Organizations also need reliable, tested measures to track their impact on permanent connections. The 2022 RHYTTAC National Needs Assessment found that 84% of grantees reported a need for training and technical assistance on measuring permanent connection. Chapin Hall’s Youth Outcomes Project’s *Measuring Up* report represents one promising framework to evaluate all four core federal outcomes (Morton et al., 2019). With effective measures in place, programs should be held accountable for helping youth build a strong informal support network. We encourage public agencies and foundations to integrate permanent connections into reporting requirements for grantees.

These significant shifts in practice and outcome measurement will take time, will, and resources. It is critical that youth homeless services are adequately funded by federal, state, and local sources, so that organizations can effectively implement and evaluate approaches to strengthening youth’s permanent connections. Together, these policy changes and investments could push the field to help youth deepen their connection to an informal community of care they can rely on in the transition to adulthood and beyond.



Key Takeaways

Federal and public agencies should define permanent connection to center individual, informal, and intergenerational relationships, including chosen family and kin.

Services should be designed with community, rather than organizations or systems, at the center of a youth’s support network.

Service providers need reliable outcome measurement tools to track their impact on permanent connection.

Public funders and foundations should require grantees to track impacts on permanent connection and provide adequate funding to do so.

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Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

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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