



CT Insider

Local agencies launch first large-scale response to youth homelessness in Fairfield County

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Jan. 24, 2021

If you found yourself without a place to stay for the night, what would you do?

Such a prospect is intimidating for adults, but even more so for the thousands of homeless teens in Connecticut who might be searching a different place to sleep every night and not know how to access resources to find more secure housing.

In response to this, staff at organizations combating homelessness are putting their heads together to create the first **large-scale coordinated response to help homeless/housing insecure youths and minors in Fairfield County. The new Coordinated Access Network, or CAN, for youths is being led by Family and Children's Agency of Norwalk, Supportive Housing Works of Bridgeport and the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford.** The CAN will serve as a comprehensive, one-stop care network that connects young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability with already existing services that meet their needs.

"This is a demonstration project. There are community services that are out there but what we want to do is look at what services are out there and make it more accessible for youth and minors," said Chris Jachino, director of homeless services for Family and Children's Agency. "The analogy is there's all these side doors...we want one entry point."

Youth homelessness is on the decline in Connecticut, but the number of young people who are homeless or have unstable housing remains high.

The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness recently released its youth outreach and count report from 2020, which shows an estimated 7,823 youths from age 13 to 24 experienced homelessness or housing instability last year. According to the CCEH's data, at least 25 percent of these youths were found in Fairfield County, especially in cities. There were 75 homeless/housing insecure youths found in Danbury, 58 in Bridgeport, 35 in Norwalk and 24 in Stamford.

The CAN was made possible by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development which has been giving out funding throughout the state for the last several years to start these action networks, according to Lindsay Fabrizio, youth initiative manager at Supportive Housing Works. This is the first time Fairfield County received such funding.

Jachino said Fairfield County got \$3.1 million from HUD for their two-year demonstration project, an amount that the groups hope to generate on their own in time so the program can become self-sustaining.

Each CAN has managers, navigators and outreach leaders, among other staff, who coordinate on a regular basis to help case manage for youths who enter their system. This "case conferencing" system has been used previously with homeless/housing insecure adults who either enter a shelter or are placed on a list of names of people in need of housing, Fabrizio said.

Fabrizio, along with Stacey Violante Cote of the Center for Children's Advocacy and Lorraine Reid-James, the CAN manager for minors for Family and Children's Agency, have been spearheading the effort to gather agencies already working with homeless/housing insecure youths, figure out what best practices they can bring to the CAN and how these groups can create a collaborative system. The work kicked off in late November with a roundtable with homeless youths to hear their experiences and determine the best way to move forward.

Through this, Fabrizio said providers are able to determine what a client's needs are, what resources are available and what sort of vacancies exist for them.

"We've been doing that with adults for a really long time," Fabrizio said. "We've started to do the same with young adults. There's a lot of people we're consulting with to make sure what we've created...has feedback by youth and is informed by their experience."

Working with youths, especially those under 18, poses a different set of challenges, Fabrizio said, since there could be families involved. The CAN leaders have been working with other statewide youth homeless groups, as well as homeless youths themselves for feedback.

Reid-James said the group is also looking to make sure the resources and providers involved would be tailored to meet youth needs. They're working with a youth advisory board to provide feedback.

"We want to make sure youth voices are amplified because if we're creating a program tailored to them, we want to make sure they can navigate the system," she said.

The group is already shaping itself around some of this feedback. Jachino said they have heard from many teens that they need a quick, singular access point to get services.

"One of the things that came out from the kickoff is youth found accessing service was way too difficult and they didn't know where to start the process," he said. "We want the entry point in one place so it makes accessing service and resources easier."

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