Outcomes for a Transitional Living Program Serving LGBTQ Youth in New York City

Theresa C. Nolan

Providing stable housing for runaway and homeless youth is a major function of a transitional living program. This article introduces the focus of one program working with LGBTQ youth in New York City and discusses some issues to consider when working with this population. The article also presents data associated with young people's lives after discharge. In any discussion of outcomes, both reason for discharge and length of stay play important roles in whether or not an exit is safe. Regardless of these two elements, the places youth move to when leaving programs are crucial to their safety and well-being. The exit can be safe even when a young person is discharged early from a program. This article presents types of exits, as well as status of employment and school enrollment at exit. Some youth and staff-identified lessons gained in the program also are discussed in detail. Types of aftercare services sought by discharged youth are specified. This article also describes any differences in outcomes for youth with and without foster care experience.

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Janine, a 19-year-old black lesbian, was forced to leave her family’s home after she graduated high school. Her mother had given her an ultimatum; Janine had to change her wardrobe and her friends or leave their home. Janine was dressing “like a boy” and hanging out with openly gay friends. Then her mother discovered a love letter to Janine, from a girl.

Janine actually never came out to her mother. For as long as she could remember, her mother had made derogatory comments about gay people she saw on TV or the street. Once she found out that Janine was a lesbian, she began verbally harassing her and reading passages to her from the Bible. Janine’s mom promised that she would put Janine “out on the street” if she “continued to be gay.” Janine’s mother said that her responsibility to her child, who was “living a life of sin,” would end once Janine finished high school.

Today, stories like Janine’s are common. Families who nurture and financially support young people like Janine may be the same families who evict them from their own homes because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. These youth are forced to learn how to survive on the street. Needing money for necessities like food, these young people often stay alive by profiting from the only commodities they have—their bodies. Sometimes, they support themselves through the drug trade. These two dangerous activities may lead youth to a world filled with addiction, assault, and hate crimes. These young people have limited work experience, no money, and few defenses; as such, sex work becomes a way to get food, quick cash, and shelter. Youth homelessness leads to such public health issues as sexual victimization, youth prostitution, HIV, and substance abuse (Ennett, Federman, Bailey, Ringwalt, & Hubbard 1999; Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce 2004). Homeless youth also are highly susceptible to medical problems that often go untreated. A large portion of youth facing these dangers leave their homes prematurely, or are forced to leave home, after they are too old for traditional foster care services. Although 18-year-olds are considered adults in this
country, it is an age at which many are ill prepared for the responsibilities and skills of adulthood. The results of youth homelessness can be devastating and even life threatening.

Youth programs can help them avoid these dangers, keeping chronic homelessness from being their future. Furthermore, a safe place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth can be a major factor in keeping some disenfranchised youth from becoming homeless adults. The question is, however, once their time is up in one of these programs, where do they go? Do “programs” help them succeed? What considerations should funders, program staff, and researchers make when assessing the success of a transitional living program? Specifically, why are transitional living programs exclusive to LGBTQ youth needed? Furthermore, how do program participants and staff conceptualize success?

Rationale

Homeless Youth: Government Response

In 1974, the U.S. government passed the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (Public Law 93-415). It also is authorized as part of the Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act (Public Law 106-71). This legislation allows for programming administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services. One of these programs is the transitional living program, designed specifically for youth under the age of 21 who are runaways, actively homeless, or facing homelessness. Providing stable housing for runaway/homeless youth is the primary function of the program. According to the RHYA:

...juveniles who have become homeless or who leave and remain away from home without parental permission are
at risk of developing serious health and other problems because they lack sufficient resources to obtain care and may live on the street for extended periods thereby endangering themselves and creating a substantial law enforcement problem for communities in which they congregate (42 USC 5701).

Furthermore, the RHYA says that runaway and homeless youth "have a disproportionate share of health, behavioral, and emotional problems compared to the general population of youth" (Public Law 93-415). Homelessness puts youth at a higher risk for HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and other health-related problems (Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992). Homeless youth also are at a higher risk for suicide, homicide, alcohol abuse, and depression. Research shows that runaway youth are more likely to abuse substances than youth who have never run away (Administration for Children and Families, 1995).

**LGBTQ Homeless Youth: Causes and Risks**

In New York City alone, an estimated 32,000 youth are homeless (Bolas, 2003). One study finds that approximately 25% to 40% of them identify as LGBTQ (Feinstein, Greenblatt, Hass, Kohn, & Rana, 2001), while another finds the percentage is close to half (Clatts, Hillman, Atillasoy, & David, 1996; Mallon, 1998a). Several reasons may explain this overrepresentation. Youth that identify as LGBTQ often experience abuse as a result of "coming out," being discovered (such as when Janine's mother found a love letter), or simply because of suspicion that they may be LGBTQ (Savin-Williams, 1994). LGBTQ youth are more likely to run away or be kicked out because of their family's lack of acceptance of their sexuality or gender expression. Although society is increasingly less heterocentric, phobias still exist within families. In addition, transphobia is still very widespread.
Research indicates youth who are LGBTQ are coming out of "the closet" at earlier ages. According to Tamashiro (2005), the average age of coming out is in the mid to late teens. Tamashiro explains that this is "an astounding 10-year drop from prior studies, which reported that the average age of coming out hovered somewhere in the mid-20s" (p.2). Other researchers also indicate that the coming out age has decreased greatly and many people are questioning their sexual orientation in adolescence (Earls, 2002; Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). In the past, people were discovering their attractions and coming out well after they were out of their parents' homes. Youth who are revealing their identities to custodial parents or guardians are at risk of losing both financial and emotional support from their families. While some very fortunate youth are accepted and supported, others face being kicked out or being abused (Earls, 2002). For those in the middle of these two extremes, parents will often meet their "responsibility" until the young person reaches age 18, as mentioned earlier, when they are too old for foster care services.

Aside from the dangers youth face while homeless, LGBTQ youth face additional risks because of individual and institutional homophobia. Similar to the risks mentioned earlier for the general homeless youth population, LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk for HIV, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. LGBTQ youth are more at risk on the street than their heterosexual peers, because they also face homophobia, discrimination, and hate crimes (Cochran, Steward, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). Survival crimes, such as sex work, robbery, and drug selling, place homeless youth at a high risk for arrests. LGBTQ homeless youth who engage in these survival tactics are even more at risk for being arrested because of discrimination and phobia. Transgender youth who do sex work on the street are the most at risk because of transphobia from both customers and police officers. In the juvenile justice system in New York City, an estimated 4% to 10% of the juvenile delinquent population identify as LGBTQ (Feinstein et al., 2001).
Furthermore, LGBTQ youth often lack LGBTQ adult role models. Having a nurturing community is important to every young person. Positive adult role models in the LGBTQ community help youth see what "real world" LGBTQ people are like, not the images portrayed by popular media. Although media may seem to be more gay-friendly, youth still get messages that being LGBTQ is wrong (e.g., through the inequality of law, doctrines of some religions, and families who love conditionally, such as only if a youth is straight). These messages only have created poorly adjusted, emotionally unstable LGBTQ adults, and not made LGBTQ youth straight as they may intend. LGBTQ youth desire the same things as heterosexual youth: a safe, comfortable home, people to help them reach their goals, and a chance to dream.

A Transitional Living Program for LGBTQ Homeless Youth

Research has been done on the outcomes of foster care programs for older youth and independent living programs, which often serve similar ages as homeless youth programs (Barth, 1990; Festinger, 1983; Jones & Moses, 1984; Mallon, 1998b). However, little is known about homeless youth who have exited programs. Transitional living programs, much like foster care programs for older youth, help young people develop life skills, meet education goals, work on vocational skills, and obtain permanent housing. In 2004, Bartlett, Copeman, Golin, Miler, and Needle (led by the New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services) examined four programs in New England to determine how a transitional living program finds success.

Each program had a different view on what success was and how they reached it. In terms of youth programming, the rate of success is often ambiguous. Is it successful when a young person discharges before their time is up and moves out to live with a friend? Is it successful when they complete their tenure at a program and meet most of their goals? Is success measured on an individual basis and defined by the young person? Success is a complicated idea
that is "influenced by community factors, program resources, and of course by the young people themselves" (Bartlett et al., 2004).

This article offers descriptive and evaluative outcome data for 40 youth discharged from a New York City federally funded transitional living program operated by Green Chimneys Children's Services. The purpose of this study was to report on general information about youths who exit this program and specifically to document success. These outcomes are important for providers to review in order to understand the purpose of nonfoster care, out-of-home settings. These data also may assist funders to develop realistic expectations for runaway and homeless youth programs. Those in the children, youth, and family services field should remember that while not all who graduate from a transitional learning program meet the initial goals they set for themselves, they do make very important achievements.

Program Introduction: Creating Community

Since 2000, the Green Chimneys program has provided 10 beds to homeless or at-risk LGBTQ youth ages 17 to 21. Youth reside in single occupancy bedrooms, within mixed gender apartments, and with two or three roommates. The three apartments are scattered sites, meaning they are in different apartment buildings, separate from the program office. Youth are required to pay rent by contributing to their own savings account held by the program, attending meetings, and completing chores. It is an affirming environment where young people's identities are not a problem. In this program, the culture of the LGBTQ community is celebrated. An atmosphere of acceptance, not simply tolerance, is crucial to creating this safe space. Employing LGBTQ staff ensures an organic understanding of what the young people are experiencing, stemming from staff's own experience of coming out and homophobia or transphobia. Clients have commented on the importance of having successful, healthy, openly LGBTQ adults assisting them in their growing up process. Having heterosexual, or
“straight” identified, staff also is important, because young people need heterosexual people to be accepting and empathic so that they understand that more than LGBTQ adults care about them.

When youth enter the Green Chimneys transitional living program, they become part of a community. This community is constructed to both affirm a young person’s identity and help them blend in with the surrounding community. Primarily, this is a community of LGBTQ people. In this program, youth meet peers who also experience society’s homophobia and transphobia. Furthermore, Green Chimneys staff work to establish community by acknowledging events like “Pride” and posting gay-themed media, including magazines and newspapers.

The second type of community created is both geographic and cultural. The area of Harlem where the apartments are located has a strong mix of black, African American, and Latino cultures; ethnic identities similar to the majority of youth entering the program. This similarity creates a sense of fitting in within the neighborhood. Although youth elsewhere are forced to choose between their sexual and ethnic identities, in this program, they are encouraged to embrace both.

Methodology

The research consisted of reviewing 40 case files of youth who have been discharged from the Green Chimneys Transition Living Program. These files represented 100% of youth discharged from the program’s beginning in 2000 until July 2005. Information was collected from the files on demographic data, pre- and posthousing situation, pre- and posteducation status, foster care history, abuse history, length of stay, and reason for discharge. Data also was gathered from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS). The data were organized into a spreadsheet, using the Excel computer program, for ease of reference. Statistics were drawn from the data as well as comparisons of demographics and postdischarge information. In addition to the
data collection, seven youth currently in the program and four former clients still in contact with the program took a survey.

Success was defined in this study was defined broadly. For example, those youth who experienced success in the area of housing were those who moved from a relatively unsafe situation (before entering the program) to a safer one upon discharge. If a young person obtained more education, they were successful in the area of education. For example, a young person may have obtained his or her GED while in the program.

Data

Gender

Figure 1 represents the gender distribution at intake. Gender is self-described by the client, not assigned by the intake staff. Approximately 47% identified as male and 42% as female. The remaining 11% identified as transgender, with transgender females more frequently than transgender males.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation also is self-assigned at intake. Clients are not required to fit in a certain category. Figure 2 shows the distribution of sexual orientation. Of the 40 youth, 19, or 47.5%, identified as gay. Lesbian-identifying youth made up 16, or 40%, of the clients. One identified as bisexual and two as heterosexual. Two of the clients identified as questioning.

Racial/Ethnic Identity

As aforementioned, the racial distribution greatly reflects the neighborhood in which the program resides. According to RHYMIS, 44% of the clients identified as Latino or Hispanic, 36% as black or African American, and 10% as white or Caucasian. The other 10% was equally divided among Asian, mixed, and other groups.
**Figure 1**

Gender Distribution at Intake

- Female \((n = 17)\) - 42%
- Male \((n = 19)\) - 47%
- Transgender M-F \((n = 3)\) - 8%
- Transgender F-M \((n = 1)\) - 3%

**Figure 2**

Distribution of Sexual Orientation

- Gay: 19
- Lesbian: 16
- Bisexual: 1
- Heterosexual: 2
- Questioning: 2
Foster Care History

Recently, a report estimated that 52% of homeless youth had some involvement with foster care (Shapiro, 2005). This portion was lower than in 2003, when the number was an estimated 64.7% (Gwadz, Nish, & Manley, 2003). In 1998, however, one study found a range of 21%–53% as an accurate representation of homeless youth with foster care history (Robertson & Toro, 1999).

Of the 40 youth who have been through the Green Chimneys program, 11, or 27.5%, reported having foster care in their past. Case file documentation was unclear for two. Experiences in foster care ranged from a few months to being adopted. Many experienced multiple placements. Of the 10 surveyed clients, three have had some kind of foster care in their pasts.

Abuse History

As discussed earlier, many homeless young people are victims of abuse. Twenty of the 40 youth—a full 50% of the sample—reported experiencing physical abuse. A number of these youth carry permanent scars, and some have learned to use violence to solve problems. Similarly, 13, or 32.5%, reported sexual abuse. Youth reported that the perpetrators were family members, including boyfriends or husbands of mothers, siblings, uncles, and friends of the family. Exactly one half of them also reported experiencing verbal or emotional abuse, including homophobic and transgenderphobic remarks. These youth commonly experienced more than one type of violence. Abuse history for five youth was unknown.

Length of Stay

Overall length of stay at the transitional living program also was recorded. The range was 1–981 days (approximately 2.6 years), with the average being 10.5 months. Forty percent of the clients resided in the program for a year or more. Male clients averaged a longer stay in the program than female (11 months and 10 months respectively). Transgender-identified clients lasted the longest, with an average of one year and 10 days.
Reason for Discharge

Youth left the program for a variety of reasons, such as finding other opportunities, being discharged for program violation, and graduating from the program. Youth who stayed in the program longer were less likely to be discharged for repeated or significant rule violation. A graduated disciplinary system was established to ensure similar response to rule violations, as well as to demonstrate that discharge is not the primary goal of staff or the rules. Table 1 displays length of stay and reason for discharge.

Reasons for discharge are grouped into four different categories. As Table 1 shows, 23 youth either completed the program or left on their own. Just less than half of the total sample were asked to leave the program, the majority for repeated rule violations. The average length of stay for those completing the program was one year, 9 months. The average length of stay for those leaving the program voluntarily was 3 months. A small percentage of these youth \( n = 4 \) either left to live with family members or join the military. Others decided that they weren’t ready to commit to a program. Those who left the program voluntarily with no plans constituted the smallest group, representing less than 1% of the population. These were youth who disappeared without word or reported that they were leaving but left no description of their plans. They stayed an average of six months.

Data on youth with and without foster care history also was compared for reasons for discharge. Overall, no significant differences were found. Youth who had foster care history completed the program at a rate of 27%, while 34% of youth who had no foster care history completed the program. Youth with foster care history were expelled from the program at a rate of 45% and youth with no foster care history were expelled 41% of the time (Table 2).

Types of Exits

The types of living situations after discharge provide important data to review when considering success. Figure 3 illustrates the
TABLE 1
Length of Youths' Stay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Youth</th>
<th>Reason for Discharge</th>
<th>Length of Stay</th>
<th>Average Length of Stay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Completed program</td>
<td>&gt;1 year, 4 months</td>
<td>1 year 9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Voluntary other opportunities</td>
<td>1 day, 10 months</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Voluntary no plans</td>
<td>27 days, 10 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Expelled</td>
<td>11 days, 1 year, 4 months</td>
<td>7 1/3 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2
Reasons for Discharge Compared with Foster Care History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Discharge</th>
<th>Youth with Foster Care History (n = 11)</th>
<th>Youth Without Foster Care History (n = 29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed program</td>
<td>3 (27.3%)</td>
<td>10 (34.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary—other opportunities</td>
<td>2 (18.2%)</td>
<td>5 (17.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary—no plans</td>
<td>1 (9.1%)</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expelled</td>
<td>5 (45.5%)</td>
<td>12 (41.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 3
Types of Exits

- Unknown (n = 7) 18%
- College (n = 2) 5%
- Street (n = 2) 5%
- Military (n = 2) 5%
- Private Residence ind. (n = 8) 20%
- Private Residence other (n = 19) 47%
exits found in this study. Twenty percent of the discharges were to an independent living situation. Many young people enter the transitional living program with an expectation that, upon graduation, they will obtain their own apartment in New York City. However, affordable housing is very difficult to obtain in the city. Some youth opt for single-room rentals. Many others will, instead, go to live with family members or friends. Forty-seven percent went to a private residence in which they were not the primary renter (e.g., homes of family members, friends, or partners). Two of that group gave discharged with plans to move to a college residence, but temporarily moved to a private residence before leaving for college. The remaining third of the discharges were split between college, military, the street, and unknown destination. The majority of the 18 percent recorded as unknown occurred during the first two years of the program’s existence. In the last three years, only one youth has left the program without notifying staff of the details of their exit.

A few trends surfaced when exit situations were compared based on foster care history. Fourteen percent of the nonfoster care youth versus 36% of youth with foster care history moved to independent living. Meanwhile, 45% of the nonfoster care youth and 18% of those with foster care history exited to a friend’s or family member’s home. Out of each group, one youth moved to college. Two of the nonfoster care clients went into the military. Three in the nonfoster care group and one with foster care history went on to live with a parent or guardian. Two in the nonfoster care group exited to the street upon discharge, while no foster care client did. Unknown exits were recorded for four of the youth without foster care history and three with foster care history (Table 3).

**Educational or Vocational Status at Exit**

The Green Chimneys transitional living program requires clients to work at least 20 hours a week. In the program, they receive
Table 3
Exit Situations Compare with Foster Care History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exit Location</th>
<th>Youth with Foster Care History (n = 11)</th>
<th>Youth Without Foster Care History (n = 29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent living</td>
<td>4 (36.4%)</td>
<td>4 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/guardian</td>
<td>1 (9.1%)</td>
<td>3 (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/family home</td>
<td>2 (18.2%)</td>
<td>13 (44.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>1 (9.1%)</td>
<td>1 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3 (27.3%)</td>
<td>4 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

training on resume writing, job interviewing, and job maintenance. Some enter already employed, while others have never held a job. Still others spend a period of time focused exclusively on school. School, while not a requirement, is emphasized with each client. Youth who have no high school diploma or GED are very strongly encouraged to pursue this while in the program.

Educational success is defined here as an increase in level of education, which includes obtaining a GED or attending a semester of college. Of the 40 youth who have been discharged from the transitional living program, 17 have been identified as educational successes. Six obtained their high school diploma or GED. Nine enrolled in college. Two clients, who were not enrolled in high school upon intake, exited the program while attending school regularly.

When employment status was recorded for this data collection, many youth had obtained jobs for part of their stay but were unemployed at their discharge. Approximately 57% were employed at discharge. Youth who stayed in the program longer were more likely to exit with a job: 69% of those staying over six months left employed.
Analysis: Characterizing Success

In this study, the data alone clearly cannot measure whether a young person or the program as a whole experienced success. In addition to the data collection via case record review, the authors conducted the qualitative survey of current and former residents. The survey asked youth to identify three lessons that they learned while in the transitional living program, what areas they felt the staff needed more experience in, and the most important thing they were getting from the program, as well as to note whether or not they felt that community was being created in the program.

Lessons Learned Identified by Youth

Staff asked youth to describe lessons they learned. The varied responses fell within three major themes: (1) budgeting and money management, (2) interpersonal skills, and (3) independence and responsibility. Budgeting and money management was identified by six of the 11 respondents. Samples include the following:

- "I am learning how to spend wisely"
- "Money management is extremely important in this program."
- "I needed to know how to pay a phone bill"

Eight respondents identified the theme of interpersonal skills. Comments about relationships, communication, and living with others were included. Some samples include the following:

- "I am learning how to communicate with others"
- "One must never burn bridges."
- "I am realizing what it takes to be a family."
- "Much to learn about communication with super [intendent]."
- "Coping with a living situation that does not involve any family members."

Six youth conceptualized independence and responsibility in different ways. Some responses were personal attributes that contribute to independence, while others were concrete skills. A sampling follows:
• “Maintaining an apartment is hard work.”
• “I am learning how to live independently.”
• “Stability, is a big issue for me.”
• “It is always good to keep supplies in stock.”

Individual respondents reported a number of other lessons, each specific to a client’s situations. This serves as a reminder that each client has different needs. For example, one youth identified goal setting as something she learned, stating that the 18 months went by so fast she had to set important goals quickly. Another client reported that she learned to manage her time. A different respondent wrote that he thought prioritizing activities and tasks was important. Still, other respondents listed lessons like life skills, decisionmaking, not lying, attitude, patience, and maturity.

Lessons Learned Identified by Staff

Accountability was a major theme in the responses of staff members. Staff reported that clients learned to be accountable not only to staff or the program, but also to their roommates. One example was responsibility for guest behavior. Staff believed that clients learned that the apartment was intended to be a safe place in which every roommate feels safe. In addition, staff felt that clients learned financial accountability because of the expectation that they turn in receipts each week in exchange for a grocery stipend.

Another lesson identified by staff was priority setting. Staff commented that they had seen clients learn the importance of paying a cell phone bill before going on a shopping spree. Staff shared that one client was able to meet her program savings goals as well as set aside money for a portable gaming device she wanted. She learned to balance her money and her priorities to meet her goals as well as to indulge in her wants.

According to one staff member, clients also learn that people care about them. Many of the program clients previously did not have a supportive network of nurturing adults. At first, clients sometimes have difficulty recognizing the support network that
is automatically in place, but eventually most of them find support in the program team.

Staff members also reported that they think clients learn life skills, including shopping, budgeting, cleaning, and interpersonal communication. The program teaches from a curriculum designed by the program founder, which includes 15 life skills (Mallon, 1990). Group workshops occur once a month and individual life skills lessons occur as needed. Within a changing social world, observing the trends among young people helps to better plan for their needs.

Lastly, one staff member identified living with others as a major lesson for program residents. When they first enter the program, very few youth recognize how difficult it may be to live in a communal setting. Clients come to realize that this adaptation must become a focus of their energy. Youth who have difficulty with interpersonal interactions with their roommates usually have the same problem in their workplaces. Shared living situations are ideal for learning how to interact with others successfully, including acquiring skills like negotiation, effective confrontation, and consistency.

Type of Aftercare Services Sought

Youth discharging from the program are offered general assistance regardless of the reason for discharge. Most youth in this study went to a private residence when they left and usually had a plan for income. The number one reason that former residents visit or call the program, however, is financial crisis. Financial crises include losing a job and needing living expense money, starting school and needing supplies, needing assistance with obtaining transportation when starting a new job, and for storage of belongings.

Youth also contact the program for reasons other than money. Many continue to contact the program’s social worker for informal counseling. Sometimes sessions actually are held, but other times they are phone consultations. Youth also remain in contact for mail. Many receive mail at the program office or their assigned apartments while in the program, and they continue to visit to
pick up mail for a number of months after discharge. Youth also stop by for computer use to check e-mail or work on updating a resume. A number of clients call for letters of recommendation or letters confirming their stay in the program.

Discussion

This study provided a look at the demographics and success of clients at a transitional living program for runaway or homeless LGBTQ youth in New York City. Although the sample size was small ($n = 40$), it provided data about today's urban homeless youth population. The sample does not generalize to all geographic areas, and research on transitional living programs in rural settings and other urban areas is needed.

A clear need for these types of programs exists, and more research is needed to learn how youth benefit from being in one. This study shows that in transitional living programs, youths can learn lessons that help them lead responsible, productive lives. In the Green Chimneys program, youth seemed to gain a sense of responsibility when held accountable by program staff, partially through meeting certain program expectations. Also, youth and staff both stated that youth learned about interpersonal communication. Staff observed youth struggle with relating to roommates while learning how to coexist with others. Youth also found the need to develop productive confrontation skills.

Furthermore, based on this small sample, a lot of transgender youth are on the streets. Transgender youth face even greater dangers in the home, in school, and on the street. Many people do not understand gender nonconformity, and many parents often have a hard time accepting their sons and daughters as gender nonconforming. Some families would rather evict a young person from home than acknowledge the young person's gender difference.

The data show that some youth resided in the program beyond the 18-month maximum length of stay. They were from the first group of clients admitted. As the program progressed, clients
were better prepared for the 18-month deadline, and staff became more adept at beginning to plan for discharge from day one. Goal plans always include housing and, at every monthly treatment team meeting, a housing plan is discussed. Also, a mandatory savings plan is put into place immediately to ensure that clients have back-up money when they discharge.

When considering how to increase the number of safe exits, programs should consider every part of a young person's process from the very beginning. Staff must focus on intake, relationship formation, program structure, disciplinary measures, and the discharge process. Housing goals must be a part of each resident's plan, and progress on these must be assessed regularly. Nevertheless, while safe exits are very important, they are not the only factor in determining clients' success in a transitional living program. Furthermore, safe exits can occur even when a young person discharges prematurely from a program.

More research is needed to examine the correlation between youth with foster care history and exits to independent living situations. Data from this study indicate that youth with foster care history exit to independent living situations more frequently than those without this history. Data also indicates that youth with no foster care history may be more likely to exit to the street than their peers with foster care experience. Reasons for these correlations should be elaborated in further studies. Do youth who have lived on the street previously see it as a viable option? Do youth who have been in foster care have more connections to support networks? In this study, youth with no foster care history were most likely to move in with a friend or family member, indicating that they do have some resources in place. A transitional living program possibly helps them establish or improve these relationships enough to make them viable options.

These findings and the literature clearly show that programs focusing on LGBTQ youth are greatly needed. The clients served by the Green Chimneys program experienced abuse and discrimination from families and from society. They needed a safe place
to be nurtured, to grow, and to learn. No matter where these young people came from or where they exited to upon discharge, each individual reported learning lessons and skills they may not have learned had they not been part of a program that welcomed them.

References


