



ACTION-Housing's My Place Program: Innovative Housing for Allegheny County's Vulnerable Youth

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Since 2010, ACTION-Housing's My Place program has provided scattered-site housing and case management to Allegheny County youth who are either transitioning out of foster care or at-risk for homelessness. In 2013, ACTION-Housing built a modern, energy-efficient structure — the 24-unit Uptown Lofts — with the belief that services could be offered more effectively if many young adults were living at a single location. Today, My Place continues to offer housing and case management based on the tenets of supervised independence; clear expectations; and motivating, compassionate support staff.

THE MY PLACE PROGRAM: AN OVERVIEW

Though the My Place program has undergone a few iterations since its inception in 2010, the through line has been care for youth most in need of support to make the transition to independence. Four hundred young adults ages 18 through 24 have participated in the program over the past nine years, with almost all transitioning into permanent housing and very few experiencing homelessness.

Throughout the years, My Place has offered varying degrees of case management and rental assistance to youth, ranging from transitional housing programs to the current array of permanent supportive housing (PSH), rapid rehousing (RRH) and independent living (IL) units, all with similar goals in mind: helping clients to achieve stable housing and a living wage.

Currently, the program serves approximately 106 youth in a combination of cooperative and scattered site living.

Table 1 provides an overview of the program and target populations, and a more detailed description of the Uptown Lofts and scattered site apartments is offered below.

Independent living (IL) consists of housing and supportive services for youth transitioning out of the foster care system.

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) combines housing with more intensive services for those with one or more chronic disabling conditions.

Rapid rehousing (RRH) assists people who are experiencing homelessness to move as quickly as possible into permanent housing through a combination of rental assistance, housing search and supportive services.

Transitional housing provides housing and appropriate supportive services to homeless people to facilitate movement to permanent housing.

TABLE 1: My Place Program Overview

	UPTOWN LOFTS	SCATTERED SITE APARTMENTS		
TYPE OF PROGRAM	Independent Living	Permanent Supportive Housing	Rapid Rehousing	Pathway to Independence
FUNDING SOURCE	Independent Living Grant (PA)	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	HUD	Independent Living Grant (PA)
PROGRAM CAPACITY	24 (including 4 units for youth awaiting RRH enrollment)	5	65	12
TARGET POPULATION AND MAIN SERVICES	Youth 18–21 who are transitioning out of foster care. Support focuses on helping youth to learn life skills and finding permanent housing.	Youth 18–24 who are homeless and need permanent supports to remain stably housed. Support focuses on obtaining/remaining in permanent housing, increasing employment and/or income and maximizing their ability to live independently.	Youth 18–24 who are homeless. RRH quickly connects people experiencing homelessness to permanent housing through financial assistance and targeted supportive services.	Youth 18-24 who need temporary housing during college breaks, summer, etc. Program provides case management, employment services, and other supportive services.
MONETARY SUPPORT PROVIDED TO YOUTH	Youth pay 30% of their income toward rent, with the money refunded at the end of their stay if there is no damage to their unit.	Youth pay 30% of rent and ACTION-Housing pays 70%.	ACTION-Housing pays first month rent and security deposit, then follows a step-down plan that ends with youth paying 100% of their rent payment.	ACTION-Housing pays 100% of housing, but youth have the opportunity to pay up to 30% of their income, which goes into a savings account that is returned at graduation.
LENGTH OF STAY	As long as needed until youth age out of the child welfare system at age 21.	As long as needed, with a goal of helping individuals become self-sufficient.	Two years maximum, with a goal of decreasing the subsidy within nine to 12 months.	As long as needed until youth graduate from college.

Uptown Lofts

Uptown Lofts, the 24-unit building on Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh, is for youth ages 18 to 21 who are going to be aging out of foster care.

The staff at Uptown Lofts is serious about its goal of equipping its residents with a foundation for independence. The main key to that success is a caring staff led by My Place program manager Sharon Langford, a Pittsburgh native who came to ACTION-Housing in 2010 after many years of experience with adolescents in Chicago.

A clear set of principles guides Langford's management of the building and its clientele: deep relationship building, accountability, real-life natural consequences, role modeling by staff and leaving past mistakes in the past. "Without accountability, we are setting them up for failure," she said. "Sometimes they gripe, but at the end of the day, they realize it's a good program."

Accountability at the Lofts includes mandatory life skills classes, regular meetings with a case manager and disciplined budgeting. Residents must have a job or be looking for one.

Consequences are structured to build responsibility, but do not include eviction except in the most severe cases. If residents do not make the midnight curfew, their curfew time might become 10:00 p.m. for a week. A guest who misbehaves is not allowed back. If residents damage their units, they pay for the repairs. Residents have a strong incentive to keep their unit in good shape, because Uptown Lofts treats their rent payments (usually 30% of income) like a security deposit. If there is no damage when they move out, the payments are refunded, giving the young person an excellent start on an independent life.

"When you're frustrated and don't have a means to express yourself, it can come out negatively," said a former resident. "You can go to the Make shop and someone will help you make the craft for the day or something on your own."

Uptown Lofts certainly encourages self-discipline, but that does not mean the mood is all business and no fun. On the contrary, ACTION-Housing made a special effort to give residents a way to express their creativity. Partnering with the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, it won a grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services to establish a "Make shop" room. The Make shop is full of equipment and materials that enable residents to enjoy a wide range of artistic experiences and practical skill development: sewing, weaving, woodworking, 3D and

screen printing, electronics, cake decorating and more. The Make shop fulfills both learning and therapeutic purposes. "When you're frustrated and don't have a means to express yourself, it can come out negatively," said a former resident. "You can go to the Make shop and someone will help you make the craft for the day or something on your own."

In one case, the Make shop jumpstarted a career. One resident developed an original clothing line and has participated in fashion shows in major eastern cities. Another client constructed a bed frame to use when she moved to a new residence.

Scattered-Site Apartments

Except for four units allocated at Uptown Lofts, young people referred to My Place with immediate housing needs but without prior foster care experience receive scattered-site housing plus support from one of three case managers.

For scattered-site leases, My Place covers the security deposit and one or two months of rent. Clients pay their own utilities and then a gradually increasing percentage of the rent during a "stepdown" period, with the goal of exiting the program within a year. Case managers meet regularly with youth to help them comply with lease terms, find or maintain employment, handle their money wisely, and make progress toward self-sufficiency.

My Place does just about whatever is needed to avert evictions, but it doesn't want youth to assume they will always get bailed out. The program has taken some steps to help clients experience natural consequences without actually becoming homeless:

- A youth who is supposed to be looking for work but does not answer daytime text messages from the case manager might be called in to meet with staff.
- If a client on stepdown does not pay their share of the rent on time, a caseworker may ask the landlord to send the client a late notice, or, in more serious cases, a notice of potential eviction (though My Place will cover the rent if necessary).

"It takes a lot to get to the point of termination in this program," emphasized scattered-site case manager Brittney Wilson. "We want to end homelessness, so we give them a plethora of chances to succeed. We're willing to go through the ups and downs with them so that positive outcomes can happen."

"We always tell them that at the start, we know they don't trust us — and we don't trust them," case manager Ryan Gordon said. "But over time, they realize that we really care about their well-being."

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Gordon told the story of one couple referred to My Place who were living on an abandoned porch. "We found them a place in Bellevue. When we came to pick them up and move them in, they took us behind the house to retrieve their belongings — soaking wet luggage that they had hidden in the woods to keep it from being stolen." They quickly embraced the opportunity for a new life and are now self-sufficient as both are working in the healthcare sector.

As one sure market-based sign of the program's success, My Place has had no shortage of property managers happy to accept program clients as tenants.

THE YOUTH WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH MY PLACE

ACTION-Housing has served 400 youth through its My Place programs. The majority of the participants have been females (62%), followed by males (37%) and 1% of people identifying as transgender or other. Most program participants were Black (75%), with smaller proportions identifying as White (14%) and other races (3%); 8% of participants did not have race information reported.

TABLE 2: My Place Participants by Gender and Race

	# OF YOUTH	% OF YOUTH
Gender		
Female	247	62%
Male	148	37%
Other gender	5	1%
Race		
Black	300	75%
White	58	14%
Other	12	3%
Missing	30	8%

The highest percentage of youth entered My Place programs at age 19 (20%), followed by age 20 (17%) and age 22 (16%). Over half (51%) of the youth enter programs as younger youth ages 18–20, compared to just 19% entering on the older end of the allowable age range (23–24).

TABLE 3: My Place Participants by Age

AGE AT PROGRAM START	# OF YOUTH	% OF YOUTH
18	68	17%
19	83	20%
20	68	17%
21	47	12%
22	64	16%
23	38	10%
24	32	8%

PROMISING OUTCOMES

Isis¹ moved into Uptown Lofts in September 2016 and had a rocky start. She was working a minimum-wage job and not following up on other job leads until her case manager warned her that such behavior could eventually get her kicked out.

“The expectations here are things we can achieve,” she affirmed. “Some people come from programs where they were given everything under the sun. You don’t get that here, but you get support.” Isis upped her game so impressively that Langford hired her as a resident assistant nine months later.

Stephanie² urgently needed housing after entering a women’s shelter to escape a domestic violence situation. In January 2016 she moved into Uptown Lofts, which she credits with turning her life around.

“I talked with the staff almost every day about my situation,” she said. With their encouragement, she completed her GED in three months while getting on a job trajectory that, in less than three years, culminated in a full-time, \$18-an-hour job with an insurance company.

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“This was the nicest place I’d ever lived in,” Stephanie commented, “and living in a nicer environment made me strive to do better.” She also took advantage of the DHS-funded 412 Youth Zone, located at Wood Street Commons downtown and operated by the Auberle youth service organization, which provides a safe drop-in center space with programming from more than 80 community partners, along with basic needs like an on-site medical clinic, laundromat and hot meals daily.

OUTCOMES BY THE DATA: STABLE HOUSING AND ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMS

The My Place programs have successfully helped youth to find and maintain stable housing. Two hundred ninety-seven youth had exited My Place programs at the time of this report, and most youth avoided becoming homeless again within two years of completing the My Place program. Analysis of youth re-entering the homeless system by having a new enrollment in a street outreach or emergency shelter program found that:

- 14 youth (5%) re-entered the homeless system within six months (180 days) of exiting the My Place program.
- 20 youth (7%) re-entered the homeless system within 12 months (365 days) of exiting the My Place program.
- 27 youth (9%) re-entered the homeless system within 24 months (730 days) of exiting the My Place program.

1 Last name withheld for privacy.

2 Last name withheld for privacy.

The My Place program also had an impact on helping youth to become further engaged in supportive programs, such as independent living and employment and training programs. Fifty-two percent of youth were active in these programs in the month prior to becoming enrolled in a My Place program, whereas 62% of youth who exited the programs were active in independent living programs within 12 months of exiting the My Place program. Twenty-one percent of youth were active in employment/training programs in the month prior to entering the My Place program, and 42% of youth were active in these programs within 12 months of exiting the My Place program.

SERIOUS ABOUT DEVELOPING STAFF

Langford praises her case management team—the case managers and resident assistants at My Place Programs Uptown Lofts — as “a really good group of young adults who really get it.” For her part, she involves them as team members in decision-making and in every aspect of all My Place Programs. “ACTION-Housing realizes that to keep talented people, you have to create an avenue for them to advance,” she stated.

Many staff have prior experience as residents or in the foster care system. Campbell, for example, lived in group homes and in foster care prior to her graduation from Pittsburgh’s Allderdice High School and went on to Bennett College in North Carolina, interning at the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) each summer. A DHS independent living caseworker drove her to North Carolina for school each fall for four years.

“First and foremost, we have a process,” she said. “Young people have to apply and interview for a unit. We have become good at identifying who is ready to take this opportunity seriously, as opposed to just wanting out of where they are living now.”

Campbell’s personal background gave her credibility with Uptown Lofts’ residents. “The young people all knew I was in the [foster care] program,” she commented. “I understand their personal stories more than most people, but in the real world, nobody will listen to your story as a substitute for going to work.”

Formal staff training at Uptown Lofts consists of a one-day orientation followed by weekly supervision meetings with Langford. The approach permits staff members to apply their own case management styles as long as they reinforce established boundaries and expectations.

Campbell expressed a perspective on why My Place has been successful. “First and foremost, we have a process,” she said. “Young people have to apply and interview for a unit. We have become good at identifying who is ready to take this opportunity seriously, as opposed to just wanting out of where they are living now. We know what questions to ask to see if they have enough motivation that being matched with us will help them move forward.

“Second, from the beginning we set clear boundaries and expectations. This is what they want and need, although they may not realize it. When they see that we are willing to go beyond the minimum to see them succeed as long as they make the same effort, that breaks down barriers. Knowing that someone cares about their future is half the battle.

“We often hear that staff at other facilities didn’t maintain clear boundaries with young people, so they don’t know how to respect people. We focus on core life skills like communication that other programs may overlook. Often, they aren’t being defiant, they just don’t know how to communicate and are open to learning.”

Wilson cited compassion and patience as the staff’s best tools in facilitating client success. “Some of them are coming from situations where all they knew was how to manipulate people or do things the wrong way,” she stated. “They can test you, but we teach them to do everything in a healthy manner.”

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Encouraging youth toward independence is not without its challenges. The biggest test of community solidarity happened when staff picked up the distinct scent of marijuana in the hallways. Langford got everyone’s attention by closing the building—no visitors allowed—and holding a town hall meeting. Naturally, no one was inclined to be a snitch, but once they understood that the presence of illegal drugs could put the whole building’s operation in jeopardy, residents cooperated in addressing and resolving the problem.

One of the biggest motivators for good behavior is that residents like what they have and don’t want to risk it. One of the biggest motivators for good behavior is that residents like what they have and don’t want to risk it. “They know they have worked hard to meet the requirements to live here,” Langford said, “and that they are in a situation that a lot of other young people would want.”

At the case management level, budgeting can be a highly sensitive area as staff try to encourage responsible financial management without being overly controlling. Langford described one meeting with a new resident, who had gone through numerous foster homes before enrolling at Duquesne University. When he showed up with his \$600 iPhone in hand, Langford recalled, “I asked him, ‘Can you eat the phone? Do you really need it?’ I could tell he was a bit agitated. But the next week, he couldn’t wait to pull out his phone — an inexpensive one that he could have gotten for \$20. ‘I went home and really thought about where the money could go,’ he told me. That’s what I was hoping he’d decide, as he had bad credit already. When he left here, he had a credit score in the 700s and promptly got a teaching job in a local school district.”

In another case when a resident was resistant to his case manager’s guidance, Langford asked him about his housing goals. “He said he wanted to live in Shadyside [one of Pittsburgh’s higher-priced neighborhoods]. I told him, ‘What you are doing now is not going to get you to Shadyside. But if you do these things, it’s a possibility.’ Sure enough, when he left here, he got an apartment on Centre Avenue in Shadyside.”

GOOD INVESTORS

Just like the individual residents, ACTION-Housing had to stay within its development budget for Uptown Lofts. The project was financed through Low Income Housing Tax Credits, a federal program managed by Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. The tax credits resulted in an investment by BNY Mellon, a long-time investor in ACTION-Housing's projects, with additional funding from the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Federal Home Loan Bank and development equity. As one of the first multi-family Passive House buildings in the country, the energy efficient design has resulted in significantly lower utility costs and higher tenant comfort. DHS, the United Way and other donations and grants to ACTION-Housing cover operational expenses.

Campbell, who has become well-networked in foster youth services during her six years as a professional, says it is a one-of-a-kind program nationally. This is borne out by the multitude of out-of-town service providers the building has hosted since it opened in 2014. The project has become a national model that others are trying to replicate in response to the needs of young adults who are at risk.

CONTINUED SUPPORT OF VULNERABLE YOUTH

Adding to their programming for vulnerable youth, ACTION-Housing has introduced two new youth-focused programs. Pathways to Independence provides housing for youth who have been involved with the child welfare system and are currently attending college by providing housing during semester breaks and summers. The second program, called Foster Youth to Independence (FYI), helps youth who are aging out of foster care find Section 8 housing and maintain their Section 8 voucher for three years with the ultimate goal of helping youth live independently.