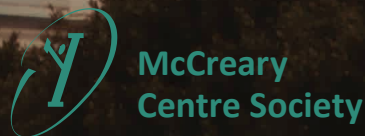




# Evaluation Report for Aunt Leah's Link: Housing First Program



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

McCreary Centre Society carried out an evaluation of Aunt Leah's *Link: Housing First* program which supports young people from government care who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The purpose of the evaluation was to identify the extent to which participants' involvement in the program contributed to improvements in their lives and to examine the extent to which Aunt Leah's adaptation of the Housing First model is meeting the needs of youth from care.

The mixed-methods evaluation included a youth self-report survey (created with youth participants at Aunt Leah's), a focus group with program participants, and interviews with Aunt Leah's managers/staff, landlords, and representatives from other community agencies familiar with the *Link: Housing First* program. In addition, a literature review was carried out and informed a comparative analysis of how Aunt Leah's adapted the Housing First model to their *Link: Housing First* program.

A total of 26 program participants completed a survey (54% females), seven took part in a focus group, and 11 staff and other stakeholders took part in phone interviews.

### Housing-Related Experiences

Findings showed that program participants had experienced challenges to finding and maintaining housing. All had experienced precarious housing at some point, including most who had been street homeless. Around 3 in 10 survey respondents were currently staying in precarious accommodations (e.g., couch surfing, on the street, or in a shelter); 35% were in housing through Aunt Leah's Place; around a quarter were living in a market rental; and a few were currently housed through BC housing.

Forty percent of survey respondents were currently living with roommates (mostly in a market rental). Those living alone were more likely to want to stay in their current accommodation than those who did not live alone, although many noted it was not feasible to live alone in the current housing market. Evaluation participants also discussed the importance of youth from care learning skills that would help them live with roommates, including conflict-resolution.

Program participants most commonly identified a housing subsidy as key to helping youth from care to find and maintain housing. They also identified the need for a stable source of income, supportive adults/workers, and knowledge of their tenancy rights and responsibilities. Landlords noted that supporting youth from care to complete the *Ready to Rent* training, and that having references from previous landlords, would help them to find housing.

### Program Description & Feedback

The *Link: Housing First* program offers participants supports to help them find and maintain housing (e.g., reference letters, tenancy education, rent subsidies). The program also offers supports beyond housing, including emotional support, food security, life-skills workshops, counselling, and education and employment supports.

Program participants valued that they could stay in the program for as long as they needed and there was no age cut-off. Other program strengths identified by evaluation participants included the emphasis on relationship-building and the provision of wrap-around supports.

Identified challenges included the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) eligibility criteria and reporting requirements. Although the eligibility criteria have expanded to include youth at-risk of homelessness, evaluation participants felt the criteria could expand further to include younger youth and to address the prevention of homelessness. Staff also felt that more funding was needed to enable workers to offer participants the one-on-one support they need.

## Outcomes

Most program participants identified improvements in their lives which they attributed to their involvement in the *Link: Housing First* program. These included an improved housing situation and greater knowledge of their rental rights and responsibilities, as well as improved social and emotional well-being. They also reported greater access to needed supports and services, as well as improvements relating to their employment situation and education planning.

In addition, most participants reported improved skills, including those relating to finding housing, keeping their housing and communicating with landlords, because of their involvement in the program. Around half reported skill improvements in budgeting and cleaning/housekeeping.

## Evaluation Participants' Suggestions

Program participants' shared suggestions for how the program might be improved if more funding was available. These included offering more check-ins and one-on-one support with learning life-skills; having staff available to drive participants to appointments or to shop for groceries; and greater support for harm reduction.

Suggestions for how the housing model could be further adapted to better support youth from care included greater flexibility in eligibility criteria, with more emphasis on preventing homelessness by including younger youth at-risk of homelessness; making reporting requirements less onerous; increasing the amount and length of eligibility for a rental subsidy beyond 12 months. Also, there should be increased housing options available, including temporary modular housing, accommodations that accept pets, and a building to house program participants which offers communal space as well as single and shared accommodation options.

## Conclusion

Evaluation findings showed that the *Link: Housing First* program has been adapted to serve youth from government care while adhering to many components of the Housing First model that have been deemed best practices for addressing homelessness. Aunt Leah's has worked within the parameters of the HPS Housing First eligibility criteria and funding structure to best support program participants.

Lack of affordable housing in Greater Vancouver has created barriers for the program to adhere to two core principles of the Housing First model, namely of offering participants immediate access to permanent housing and of offering them some choice in the type of housing they receive. The program has therefore expanded the model to offer participants a wide range of supports and services before they secure housing. The program has also added to the model by providing opportunities for participants to connect socially with other young people from care and creating a sense of community; and offering life-skills development and training opportunities to increase their likelihood of housing stability.

Evaluation findings indicated that the *Link: Housing First* program has contributed to a range of improvements in participants' lives, in the areas of housing stability; life-skills; social and emotional well-being; education; and employment.

## BACKGROUND

Aunt Leah's Place contracted McCreary Centre Society to carry out an independent evaluation of its *Link: Housing First* initiative from April 1, 2018 to March 31, 2019. This program supports youth from government care (ages 19 and older), who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, to find and maintain housing and to access needed supports in the community. The program is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS).

The purpose of the evaluation was to identify the degree to which involvement in the program contributed to improvements in participants' lives (housing stability, life-skills, social and emotional well-being, and education and employment opportunities). The evaluation also examined the Housing First model and identified how successfully Aunt Leah's adapted it to meet the needs of youth from care.

A literature review on Housing First was carried out which informed the comparative analysis of how Aunt Leah's adapted the Housing First model to their *Link: Housing First* program. The literature review is comprised of an overview of the Housing First model developed for adults and a summary of outcomes associated with that model, and is followed by an examination of a Housing First model developed for youth.

The mixed-methods evaluation also included a youth self-report survey which participants at Aunt Leah's co-developed with McCreary researchers. In addition, a focus group with program participants was carried out, as well as interviews with Aunt Leah's managers/staff, landlords, and representatives from other community agencies familiar with the *Link: Housing First* program.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

### Information Sources

#### ***Survey for Link: Housing First participants***

A youth survey was developed by McCreary in partnership with young people at Aunt Leah's. McCreary staff carried out a workshop at Aunt Leah's in which participants learned how to create a survey. Youth then developed a draft survey for participants in the *Link: Housing First* program, and McCreary finalized the survey with input from Aunt Leah's managers and staff.

The survey was a point-in-time (snapshot) design and included questions about the following:

- Youth's background
- How long they have accessed the *Link: Housing First* program
- Any other housing supports (outside Aunt Leah's) participants were currently accessing
- Past challenges finding and keeping housing
- Current housing situation (if housed, was it market housing, etc.)
- Supports that helped or would have helped them to find and keep housing
- Feedback about their experience in the program and any suggestions to improve it
- The degree to which participants felt their involvement in the program contributed to improvements in their mental health, housing stability, independent-living-skills, and education and employment opportunities.
- The housing model

The survey was available in paper-and-pencil format as well as online. All those who had been in the program for at least three months were eligible to complete a survey.

#### ***Participant focus groups/interviews***

The purpose of the focus groups was to supplement participants' survey answers with more in-depth information about their experiences in the program and with housing.

McCreary planned to facilitate up to three focus groups with a subset of program participants (with different participants at each, including young parents).

In-person or phone interviews were offered to participants who were interested in sharing their feedback but could not attend a focus group or felt more comfortable taking part in a one-on-one interview.

The focus group/interview questions addressed the following:

- Past challenges finding and maintaining housing.
- Potential challenges and benefits associated with living with roommates; what young people might need to help prepare them for living with roommates.
- What supports young people from care need in order to find and maintain housing.

- How much they felt the *Link: Housing First* program supported participants to find and maintain housing
- Other feedback about the program, including which aspects of the program were working well, and any suggestions on what could be improved.
- How much (if at all) their involvement in the program has impacted their lives.
- Their thoughts on the housing model, and any suggestions to further modify the model to best meet the needs of young people from care.

### ***Interviews with Aunt Leah's staff and other community agencies***

Interviews took place with Aunt Leah's staff, managers, and directors. Staff involved with the Friendly Landlord Network were also invited to take part in an interview. They were asked about the Housing First model and how Aunt Leah's has adapted it; aspects of the current model and program that were working well; areas that might need improvement; and lessons learned.

Interviews also took place with representatives from other community agencies whom the *Link: Housing First* program partnered with or provided consultation services for regarding the Housing First model. They were asked (if applicable) about challenges they experienced in implementing the Housing First model with the young people they serve; the components of the model that have worked well; lessons learned from their experience; and any recommendations for implementing the model with young people from government care.

### ***Interviews with landlords***

Landlords connected to Aunt Leah's Place (e.g., through Aunt Leah's Foundation; Friendly Landlord Network) were invited to take part in an interview/focus group. They were asked about the challenges renting to young people; their perspectives of what youth from care need to successfully find and maintain housing; their experiences with renting to participants connected to Aunt Leah's; and their views on what it would take for more landlords to rent to young people (including those from care).

### ***Literature review and comparative analysis***

McCreary carried out a literature review on the Housing First model for adults and an adapted model for youth. The information in the literature review was then used to compare these Housing First models with Aunt Leah's *Link: Housing First* model for youth from care.

### ***Program data***

Data collected through the program was provided by Aunt Leah's for inclusion in this report, such as the number of participants housed to date.

## Evaluation Participants

A total of 26 program participants completed a self-report survey. Also, a focus group with seven program participants took place in October 2018. Two other focus groups were scheduled (including one specifically for participants who were parenting), but no participants attended. Youth were offered a gift card honorarium for their involvement in the evaluation.

A total of 11 individuals took part in one-on-one phone interviews, including Aunt Leah's staff and managers; landlords who rented to *Link: Housing First* program participants; and representatives from other community agencies.

## About this Report

All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics. Percentages that represented a very small number of youth were not reported due to risk of deductive disclosure. These findings were reported descriptively instead.

Any comparisons and associations in this report were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . This means there was less than a 5% likelihood the results occurred by chance.

In this report, "staff" refers to Aunt Leah's staff, managers, and directors who took part in the evaluation. "Partners" refers to representatives from other community agencies whom Aunt Leah's partnered with or provided consultation services for regarding the Housing First model.

All quotations in this report are from program participants.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: HOUSING FIRST

The goal of Housing First is to support chronically homeless individuals with mental health and substance use challenges to find and maintain housing. The underlying premise is that individuals are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed (Gaetz, 2013). Housing First programs aim to offer participants supports to find and maintain housing which is safe, affordable, and an appropriate fit for their needs. These programs often offer assistance to access income supports and rental subsidies, as well as to communicate with landlords and to develop independent-living skills (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013). Housing First initiatives also offer a range of other supports (e.g., mental health, education, employment) to enhance participants' well-being.

Core principles of the Housing First model include offering immediate access to permanent housing; adhering to a client-centered and individualized approach; offering individuals some choice in the type of housing they receive (e.g., scattered site or congregate/community-living); providing opportunities for social, cultural, and community engagement and inclusion; and fostering well-being by offering a range of supports and services in multiple domains, including access to harm-reduction supports for those with substance use challenges (Collins et al., 2012; Gaetz et al., 2013).

Thus, a key component of the model is to offer low-barrier, harm-reduction supports which do not require participants to stay sober or to access specific services as a condition of entering or staying involved in the program. In practice, however, Housing First programs have tended to place more emphasis on the low-barrier admission criteria and less on offering harm-reduction supports throughout participants' involvement in the program, which reflects lack of fidelity to an essential tenet of the model (Watson et al., 2017).

However, Gaetz and colleagues (2013) have maintained that while all Housing First programs should ideally adhere to the core components of the model, there is no 'one size fits all' approach because different programs face different circumstances (the population served, availability of resources, etc.).

### Outcomes among Adults

The largest randomized controlled trial of Housing First was carried out in five Canadian cities (Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montréal, and Moncton) through the initiative At Home/Chez Soi. This initiative compared the effectiveness of Housing First to that of existing services in each city ('treatment as usual' or TAU) among adults living with mental illness. The quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that over the course of the two-year project, adults in the Housing First group demonstrated greater housing stability than those in the TAU group, as well as reduced nights in emergency shelters and fewer visits to the ER (Goering et al., 2014). A multi-city Housing First initiative in Europe also found high housing retention rates among participants (Busch-Geertsema, 2013). More robust outcomes have been found in programs that have adhered more closely to the core components of Housing First, suggesting that focusing on all components of the model and on model fidelity is warranted (Goering et al., 2014).

Housing First participants have also shown greater improvements in quality of life and community functioning than those in comparison groups (Goering et al., 2014). However, some findings from At Home/Chez Soi suggested that Indigenous participants might struggle with developing a sense of place and home due to broader systemic factors and lack of culturally appropriate affordable housing (Alaazi, Masuda, Evans, & Distasio, 2015). Additionally, findings from Europe have indicated mixed results in terms of community integration and engagement (Busch-Geertsema, 2013).

Over the course of At Home/Chez Soi, there were mental health improvements as well as reductions in substance use and justice involvement. However, these outcomes were comparable among participants in the Housing First group and those in the TAU group (Aquin et al., 2017; Goering et al.,

2014). Other Housing First studies have found similar results (e.g., Somers, Moniruzzaman, & Palepu, 2015).

Goering and colleagues carried out a cost analysis and concluded that Housing First is a sound investment. The most pronounced cost savings were found among participants who had the highest costs at the start of their involvement in the project (Goering et al., 2014; Goering & Streiner, 2015).

The traditional Housing First model (for adults) has been found to improve housing stability among youth under the age of 25, but improvements in other areas have not been found (Kozloff et al., 2016). Kozloff and colleagues (2016) concluded that developmentally-appropriate adaptations to Housing First might be needed to support improvements in a range of domains among young people.

### **Housing First for Youth**

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) is an adaptation of the Housing First approach to addressing homelessness among adults (Gaetz, 2017). The adaptation is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from those of adult homelessness, and therefore the solutions must be youth-focused. The development of the framework resulted from a collaboration between the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, The Street Youth Planning Collaborative (Hamilton), and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. Young people with lived experience of homelessness provided input throughout the process (Gaetz, 2017).

Programs can only be considered HF4Y if they are designed specifically to meet the needs of youth and young adults (Gaetz, 2017). Some of the core principles of HF4Y are similar to those of the adult model. These include providing individuals with supports to obtain safe and permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible, without preconditions; having an individualized, client-centered approach with no time-limits; and offering opportunities for social inclusion and community integration (which includes engaging in meaningful activities and connecting with natural supports, including family or extended family if appropriate). The other core principles of HF4Y are more youth-specific, namely 'youth choice, youth voice and self-determination' and a 'positive youth development and wellness orientation.'

'Youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination' refers in part to offering youth choices regarding housing and the supports they receive. Youth are encouraged to make decisions—after being given enough information to make informed decisions—and are supported to learn from their mistakes (Gaetz, 2017). Youth are also encouraged to make choices about their future, and a case worker supports them in setting and achieving their goals. 'Youth voice' refers to giving youth the opportunity to provide feedback on the supports they receive and to be actively involved in designing and evaluating local HF4Y programs (Gaetz, 2017).

A positive youth development and wellness orientation is a strengths-based approach. It focuses on youth's assets and on assisting young people to connect to needed services and supports in the community to promote their healthy development (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Holtschneider, 2016). This approach offers youth access to a wide range of supports and opportunities (e.g., mental health and substance use supports; educational and employment opportunities; life-skills development) to bolster their protective factors and increase their likelihood of a healthy transition to adulthood. Harm-reduction supports are typically implemented when addressing substance use challenges (Gaetz, 2017).

A positive youth development orientation recognizes that many homeless young people have experienced trauma (e.g., abuse, exposure to domestic violence, sexual exploitation), and incorporates a culture of trauma-informed care to prevent re-traumatization and to promote wellness (Kirst, Aery, Matheson, & Stergiopoulos, 2016). For example, program staff can be trained on trauma,

and youth can be supported to develop strategies to regulate their emotions and manage their stress, and to feel they have some control over their lives. The model acknowledges that addressing trauma and building trusting relationships can take time, and that young people may need to be supported for several years (Kirst et al., 2016). The HF4Y model emphasizes that young people are provided with supports for as long as they need them. The model also acknowledges that the needs of young people evolve over time, due to developmental and other changes, and therefore the types of supports that are offered must be flexible (Gaetz, 2017).

A difference between the adult Housing first model and HF4Y is that the latter comes with two conditions: Young people must agree to a weekly visit or contact with a caseworker, and youth are expected to contribute up to 30% to the cost of rent if they have an income source (Gaetz, 2017).

Communities or agencies may wish to adapt the HF4Y model based on the specific needs of the group of youth they serve. For example, HF4Y can be adapted to support young people transitioning from government care, even if they are not homeless (Gaetz, 2017).

### **Outcomes among Youth**

While there are ample studies on the effectiveness of Housing First among adults, few studies exist on its effectiveness among youth. One initiative that has been evaluated is the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary's Infinity Project. Funded by the Calgary Homeless Foundation, the Infinity Project is a Housing First initiative that supports youth (aged 16-24) to find and maintain permanent housing. Four dedicated housing support workers each have a caseload of 7-8 youth, with whom they develop relationships to gain a better understanding of how to best support them. Infinity staff also invest in developing relationships with housing providers (e.g., landlords and property managers) to ensure that young people can access housing (Gaetz et al., 2013).

This emphasis on forming ties with housing providers, and renting blocks of apartments, has enabled the Infinity Project to grow its housing portfolio, despite Calgary's shortage of affordable housing for youth. Landlords are often more willing to rent to youth connected to Infinity because they are guaranteed to receive rent through the project, are supported with tenant challenges, and can seek compensation for damages (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Infinity Project evaluation findings indicated that housing stability increased and homelessness decreased among participants who had been involved in the program for two years. Within six months of joining the program, income stability improved through employment or other funding. However, youth still needed to access rental subsidies because their income was insufficient to cover their monthly living expenses. Most youth reported that the program helped them to access community supports and services. In addition, a cost-benefit analysis indicated that for each youth served, there was a decrease in the average cost of services per day (Davies, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2013).

Lessons learned from the Infinity project included the importance of giving young people a voice in decisions that affect their lives, because doing so contributes to youth developing autonomy and to becoming more engaged in setting goals and achieving them. Other lessons learned were the need for an adequate supply of affordable housing; the need for intensive long-term supports (e.g., in the areas of life-skills development, mental health, substance use, education, employment, and navigating various systems); the importance of supporting youth to develop healthy relationships and connections within the community; and the importance of longer-term financial assistance (e.g., rental and living subsidies). In addition, small caseloads for each worker (i.e., a sufficient number of staff) are beneficial to offer youth the intensive support they need (Gaetz et al., 2013).

## **Housing First Model in Vancouver**

Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS)—a federal program that funds Housing First projects to address homelessness in Canada—commissioned reviews of the HPS program. These reviews took place through a consultation process with Housing First providers and clients (Canham, O’Dea, & Wister, 2017).

Identified strengths of the Housing First model (for adults) in Metro Vancouver included offering people an immediate place to live where they could stabilize; intensive case management for those who needed it; collaboration among service providers to provide optimal wrap-around support; start-up funds (e.g., for furniture, household goods, cleaning supplies, food); and up to \$450 per month in rent subsidies. Another identified strength was the availability of peer support, although this component was not an intrinsic part of the Housing First model (Canham et al., 2017).

An identified challenge included the eligibility criteria of chronic homelessness (currently homeless and having spent “more than 180 nights in a shelter or place unfit for human habitation in the past year”) or episodic homelessness (experiencing three or more episodes of homelessness in the past year; Government of Canada, 2014). The eligibility criteria excluded those who were not street-entrenched or did not meet the definitions of chronic or episodic homelessness. Also, couch surfing was not considered a form of homelessness, even though the Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver deemed it as such (Canham, 2018). There were suggestions to expand the definition of chronic and episodic homelessness so that more of the homeless population would qualify for services (Homelessness Partnering Strategy Engagement, HPE, 2018). There was also feedback that more emphasis should be placed on measures to prevent homelessness (Canham et al., 2017).

Another challenge was the claims-based funding model—where agencies paid costs upfront and then submitted claims at the end of their billing cycle. Agencies said the approach created challenges because of the delay in receiving funds. Also, there was rigidity in what could and could not get reimbursed, which compromised service providers’ ability to be flexible and responsive to their clients’ needs. There were also time-consuming reporting requirements which detracted from the time that staff could spend with clients (Canham et al., 2017).

While agencies and clients appreciated that the HPS Emergency Housing Funds were extended from four to 12 months, they felt it was still not long enough and the subsidy amount was insufficient, given the expensive housing market in the Lower Mainland. There was also a limited number of subsidies that each organization could distribute to clients. There was criticism that the rent subsidies provided to clients were markedly less substantial than those that the federal government had distributed during the At Home/Chez Soi pilot project (i.e., the latter involved providing a larger rent subsidy to each client and for the duration of the project; Canham et al., 2017).

Moreover, the lack of affordable housing in Metro Vancouver—coupled with limited rent subsidies—reduced the housing options for Housing First clients and limited the number of clients that could be housed (HPE, 2018).

Additional feedback has been that Housing First should not be used as a “one size fits all” approach under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, and there should be opportunities to adapt the Housing First model to better meet the needs of clients, including youth (HPE, 2018).

The federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development will be incorporating the feedback that has been collected on Housing First and will be launching an expanded and redesigned homelessness initiative on April 1, 2019 (HPE, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review offered an overview of the Housing First Model and its adaptation for youth. It also outlined evaluation findings and lessons learned when working with homeless youth within a Housing First framework. Aunt Leah's Place has incorporated a number of these components into its *Link: Housing First* program for youth from government care. The evaluation of *Link: Housing First* is presented next.

## DATA PROVIDED BY AUNT LEAH'S

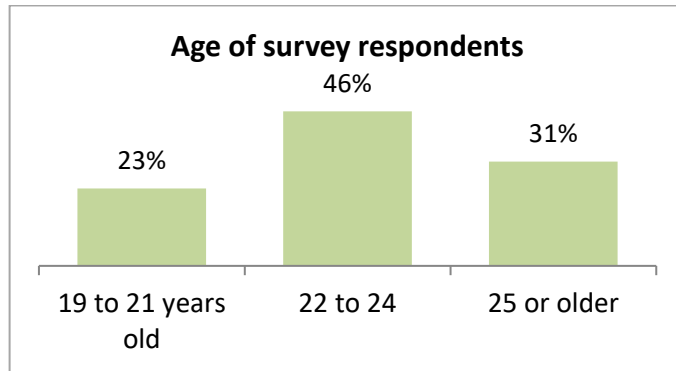
Information in this section was collected by Aunt Leah's Place. Please contact Aunt Leah's for any further details.

<b>Link: Housing First</b>	
Total number of participants:	<b>63</b>
Number currently in the program:	<b>63</b> Note: Aunt Leah's does not exit participants from the program. The door is always open for them to return.
Housed:	<b>43</b>
Homeless:	<b>20</b> Currently living in a shelter, in a place that is not suitable for habitation, couch surfing, or on the street.
Evicted (and general reasons):	<b>5</b> It is rare for there to be a formal eviction for a clear violation of the tenancy. Participants more commonly walk away from informal arrangements due to non-payment of rent or some dispute.
Re-housed:	<b>15</b>
Participants currently receiving rent subsidy:	<b>14</b>

## PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Information in this section is primarily from the 26 *Link: Housing First* program participants who completed a survey.

A little over half (54%) of survey respondents identified as female and the rest (46%) identified as male. They ranged in age from 19 to 31 or older, and most commonly were 22 to 24 years old.



Survey respondents most frequently identified their family background as European (46%) and/or Indigenous (39%), followed by East/South/Southeast Asian, African, and Latin American (they could mark all backgrounds that applied).

Forty percent of survey respondents were currently working at a paid job, and some were volunteering. A few were currently in school.

### Program Involvement

The vast majority indicated they were currently involved in the *Link: Housing First* Program, whereas the remaining few indicated they had been previously involved. Around a quarter (24%) had been involved in the program for less than six months, whereas 36% had been involved for 6 to 11 months, and 40% for one year or more. Most indicated they were not currently accessing housing supports outside Aunt Leah's Place.

Most survey respondents (70%) indicated that the *Link: Housing First* program had helped them to find housing, including 39% who reported that the program had helped them do so multiple times.

### Government Care Experience

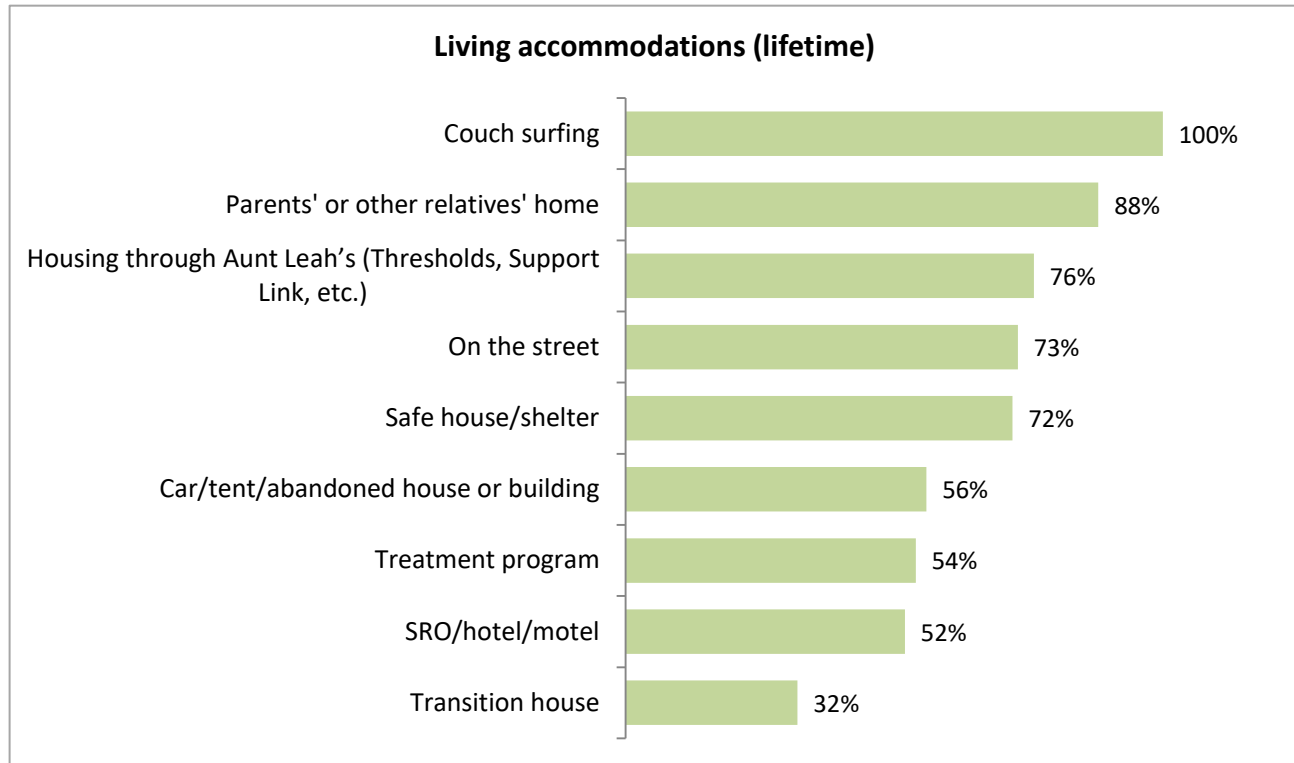
Around a quarter of program participants (24%) had been in one or two types of government care at some point in their lives, whereas the majority (76%) had been in three or more types of care. Twenty percent indicated they were currently on an Agreement with Young Adults.

Care experience (now or in the past)	
Youth Agreement	88%
Foster home	76%
Group home	72%
Agreement with Young Adults	64%
Custody centre	44%

Note. Participants could mark all that applied.

## Living Experiences

All participants reported experiencing precarious housing at some point (e.g., on the street, couch surfing, SRO, shelter, in a car or abandoned building), including around 3 in 4 who had been street homeless.



Note. Participants could mark all that applied.

Thirty-one percent indicated they were currently staying in precarious accommodations, and most commonly couch surfing. Another 35% were currently staying in housing through Aunt Leah's Place, including the Telford building. Around a quarter (23%) were currently in a market rental, and a few were currently housed through BC Housing.

Half of survey respondents (50%) indicated they were currently receiving a housing subsidy, and a couple of others indicated they were unsure if they were receiving one.

Most survey respondents had been in their current accommodation for two months or more, including 40% who had been there for 2–6 months; 24% for 7 months to one year; and 20% for more than one year.

### ***Living situations***

Forty percent of survey respondents were currently living with roommates (and the vast majority had done so at some point). Most of those currently in a market rental were living with roommates.

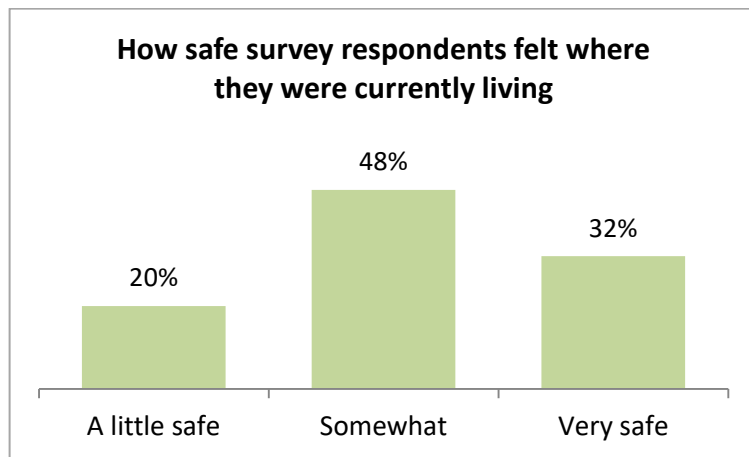
Around half (48%) of survey respondents were currently living alone (and all had lived alone at some point). Most of those currently living alone were staying in housing through Aunt Leah's Place. (Those who indicated not currently living alone or with roommates were staying with relatives or in precarious housing such as on the street.)

Focus group participants discussed the potential challenges and benefits relating to living with roommates. The identified benefits were lower housing costs (e.g., paying less rent) and the opportunity to eat meals with someone and to feel less lonely. Challenges included developing trust among roommates, which was not always easy and could take time, and participants felt there was risk of theft by a roommate. Another challenge was moving into a place with multiple roommates where the other roommates had already been living together, because it could feel uncomfortable being the new person in the home.

Some participants felt that youth should try to live on their own before they live with roommates so they can learn about themselves and grow as a person. However, others countered that while it might be ideal for youth to experience living on their own, it was too expensive in Greater Vancouver for most young people to have the opportunity to do so.

### ***Sense of safety & satisfaction with current accommodation***

All survey respondents reported feeling at least a little safe in their current living accommodation, including around a third who felt very safe (none reported feeling not at all safe).



When asked if they wanted to stay in their current accommodation, 56% indicated that they did (at least for now), including some who wanted to stay long-term. Some of those who wanted to stay specified their reasons, such as feeling they had enough privacy, and the convenience of living close to work and other places they accessed. Some of those who did not want to stay specified that they wanted to live on their own rather than with others; they were currently staying in precarious housing or an unsanitary accommodation (e.g., mold, rats); were dissatisfied with their neighbours; or found their current accommodation too expensive.

**Some comments from survey respondents who wanted to stay in their current accommodation...**

*"Even though it's shared I still feel like I've got my own privacy."*

*"I like it there. Close to work and to everything I am involved in."*

*"I hope to stay here for as long as possible and at least a year."*

**Some reasons that other survey respondents wanted to leave...**

*"I don't want to stay in my current accommodation because I prefer to have my own place."*

*"There's mould, mice, rats, plumbing issues."*

*"Shitty neighbors make for a shitty situation."*

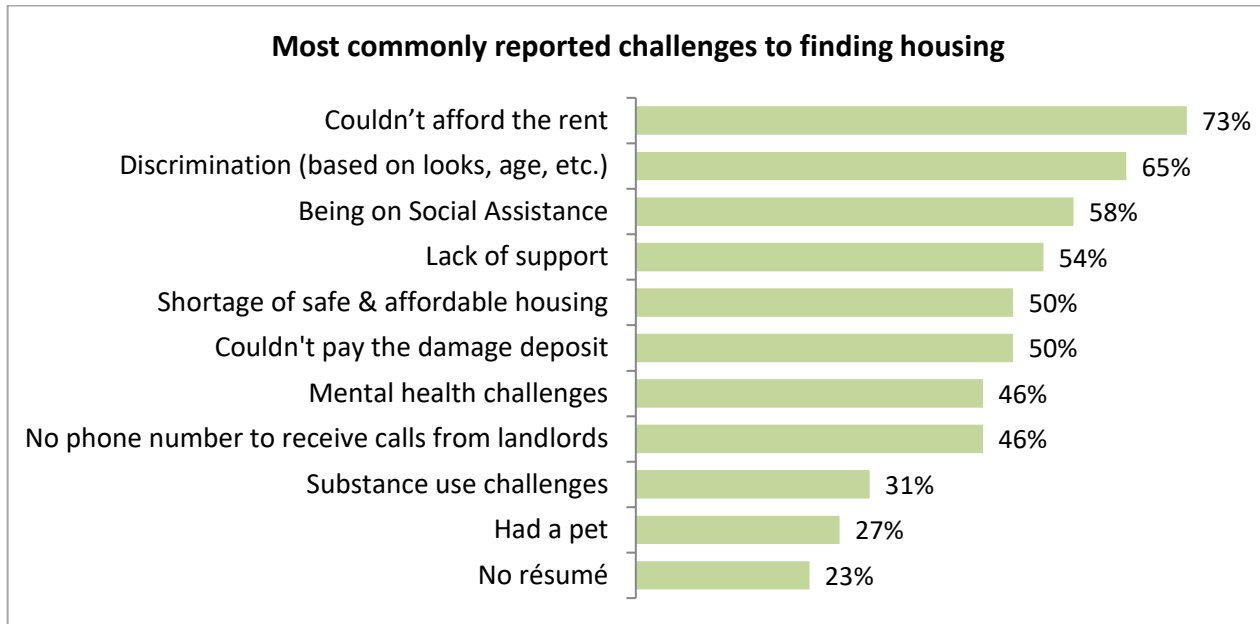
*"It's a little bit cramped and expensive."*

Those who felt somewhat or very safe in their current accommodation were more likely than those who felt only a little safe to report wanting to stay (70% vs. 0%). Also, survey respondents who lived alone were more likely to want to stay in their current accommodation than those who did not live on their own.

## EXPERIENCES FINDING & MAINTAINING HOUSING

### Challenges Finding Housing

All survey respondents had experienced challenges finding housing at some point. Most identified inability to afford the rent; discrimination; and being on Social Assistance as barriers to finding housing.



Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

Similarly, program participants who took part in a focus group said that a barrier they had experienced was that rentals were unaffordable to them, particularly in Greater Vancouver. Some added that it felt like a competition to find safe and affordable housing in Vancouver compared to other places they had lived, where securing housing had been easier and more affordable. Participants noted it was particularly challenging to find safe and affordable housing in Greater Vancouver which was close to public transit.

Focus group participants felt that too many rules posed a barrier to finding housing. For example, rules that did not permit smoking in the accommodation created challenges for those who smoked, and regulations that banned pets put youth in a difficult position because they did not want to give up their pet.

Securing references was another challenge identified by focus group participants, particularly if they had never lived independently. Even if they had people they could use as references they were not always sure that these individuals would provide positive references or would respond to landlords' attempts to contact them. In addition, credit checks and criminal record checks that some landlords required prospective tenants to undergo created challenges, due to some young people's histories of poor credit and justice involvement. Also, focus group participants said that some landlords only accepted rent payments in cash, whereas youth's rent subsidies were only available in the form of a cheque, which limited their housing options.

Focus group participants felt that discrimination from landlords, due to youth's age, was another barrier to finding housing. Some landlords who took part in the evaluation noted that their personal experiences renting to youth were as positive, if not more positive, than their experiences renting to

adults. However, they felt that many landlords held negative perceptions and stereotypes relating to young people, which needed to change on a systemic level so that more landlords would feel comfortable renting to youth.

A comment in the focus group was that it was difficult to stay motivated to look for housing when youth had already been looking for a long time and had experienced multiple barriers to securing housing.

### Supports Needed to Find Housing

When asked what supports youth from care need to help them find housing, focus group participants identified reference letters from reliable people (e.g., their support worker), as well as housing subsidies. Similarly, survey respondents were asked what they have needed, or what they need, to help them find housing, and they most commonly identified a housing subsidy.

What survey respondents have needed to help them find housing	
Rent subsidy	75%
Access to a housing database (list of available housing)	67%
Support with getting references	67%
Good connections	67%
Supportive adult to accompany them to rental viewings	63%
Income (from a job, Income Assistance, etc.)	63%
Knowledge of tenancy rights and responsibilities	50%
Roommates to share costs	46%

Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

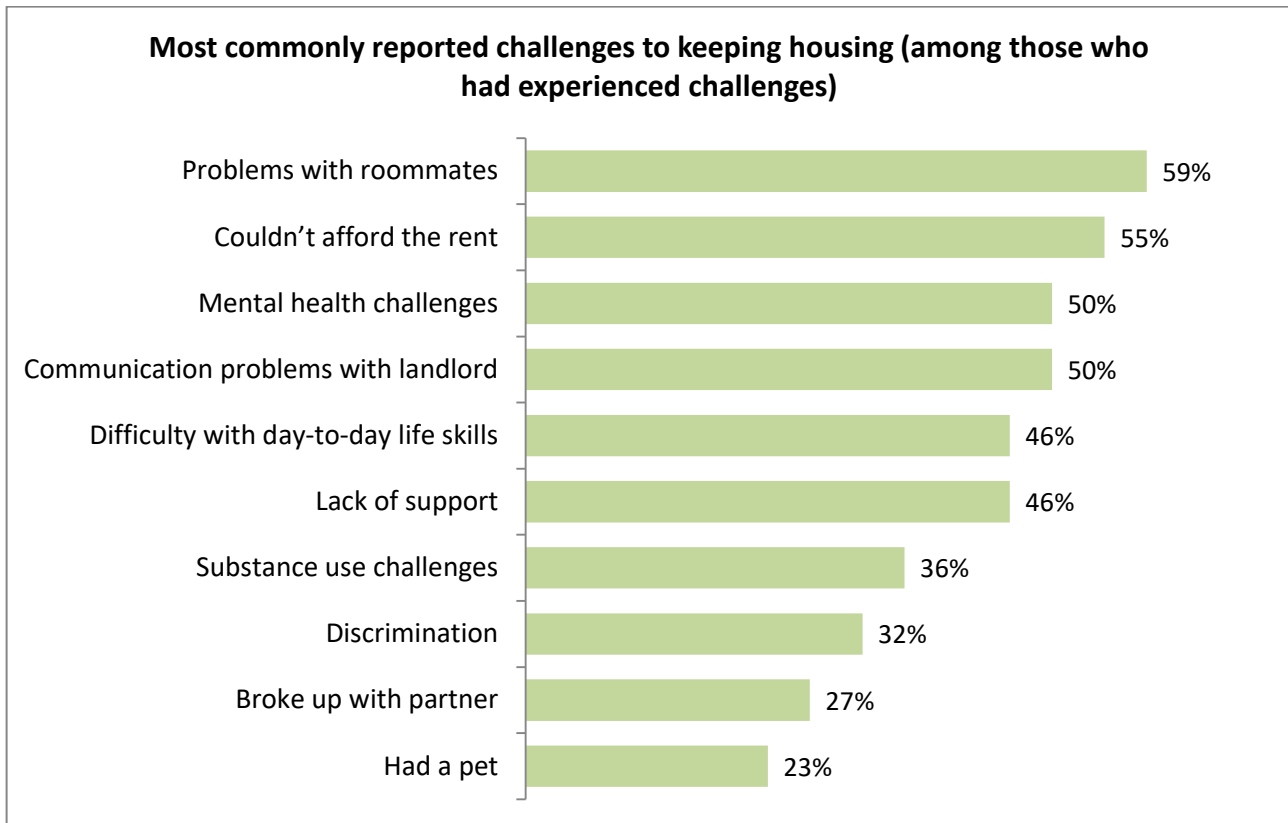
Landlords who were interviewed felt it could be beneficial for youth from care to complete a program such as *Ready to Rent* to help them find housing. They noted that potential youth tenants who had a certificate from such a course would look favourable to landlords and would have an advantage over other young people in securing an accommodation.

Landlords also felt it was helpful when youth had references from previous landlords. They added that it was important for youth to have had positive relationships with their previous landlords to receive a (complimentary) reference. Landlords also felt it was important for any housing program or agency that helped youth find housing to have a good reputation and credibility among landlords, or else landlords would not rent to youth connected to that agency.

Access to a website that listed available rentals (e.g., a database) was also identified by landlords as something that could help youth find housing.

### Challenges to Maintaining Housing

The majority of survey respondents (85%) had difficulty keeping their housing at some point. Among these participants, their most commonly reported challenges included problems with roommates and being unable to afford the rent.



Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

In line with the survey responses, focus group participants highlighted challenges with roommates as contributing to them losing their housing in the past. They underscored the importance of finding reliable roommates and developing a positive relationship with them. Mental health challenges—experienced by roommates and themselves—had also contributed to difficulties maintaining housing.

Participants had also experienced challenges with having enough money to consistently pay their rent and bills (e.g., electricity). In addition, they sometimes struggled with following the housing rules (e.g., no smoking) which contributed to them losing their housing.

Landlords who were interviewed identified some challenges associated with renting to young people (not necessarily those connected to Aunt Leah's Place). Some felt that many young people were not "rent ready" in terms of both the ability to pay their rent on time (e.g., due to unstable work) and the level of responsibility that was needed to live independently (e.g., cleanliness, being respectful toward other tenants, and following rules). Also, some landlords had found that young people tended to not report when something was broken or not working properly. They said they would prefer for their tenants to inform them in these situations so that the issue could be promptly addressed and remedied.

Landlords noted that sometimes youth's mental health challenges created barriers to maintaining employment, which in turn resulted in challenges paying the rent.

## Supports to Maintain Housing

When asked on the survey what was helping them to keep their current housing, participants who indicated the question applied to them most commonly identified a rent subsidy.

<b>What survey respondents most commonly identified as helping them to keep their current housing (among those who indicated the question applied to them)</b>	
Rent subsidy	59%
Income (from a job, Income Assistance, etc.)	53%
Access to a safe and supportive worker	47%
Knowing their tenancy rights and responsibilities	41%

Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

Other responses (not in the table) included mental health support, support communicating with landlords, and roommates to help share costs of rent (numbers too small to report).

Focus group participants were also asked what supports youth from care need to help them keep their housing. They highlighted the importance of youth receiving long-term rent subsidies to help them maintain stability. Some also felt that financial literacy courses could be helpful.

Additionally, focus group participants said it was vital for youth to learn conflict-resolution skills, to prepare them for living with roommates. They felt that adults should start preparing and guiding youth from care at a young age (e.g., age 15 or younger if possible) on how to live with roommates, because having these skills increased the likelihood of experiencing success with roommates later on.

Also, participants noted that their relationship with their landlord was important to maintaining their housing. They felt that learning to communicate with landlords, and receiving support to communicate with landlords, was important. Similarly, landlords who were interviewed felt that young renters needed support to learn skills to communicate effectively with their landlord, such as connecting with their landlord when something needed to be fixed, and responding to landlords' messages in a timely manner.

Landlords who were interviewed also said that youth needed steady employment or income to help ensure their rent was paid on time. In addition, landlords felt that young renters needed to learn the skills that are necessary to live independently and among neighbours (e.g., cleanliness, budgeting/money management).

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION & FEEDBACK

### Criteria for Getting & Staying Involved

Aunt Leah's staff explained that the *Link: Housing First* program provides support to youth aged 19 or older from government care who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Staff said that the Housing First funding criteria include youth transitioning out of care (due to exiting the child welfare system and having no fixed address). However, those who have already transitioned out of care must meet other criteria to join the program, based on the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) definitions of chronic and episodic homelessness. They explained that the criteria more recently expanded to include youth at risk of homelessness.

Once involved in the program, staff said the only requirement for staying involved is that participants must meet with an Aunt Leah's worker for a check-in approximately once a month. When focus group participants were asked about the program's rules, they noted that few were in place, which they appreciated. They added the program takes a harm-reduction approach to substance use. They were permitted to use substances outside their accommodation but could not use them indoors out of respect to their home and their neighbours.

Staff said there were no stipulations for participants regarding living alone or the number of roommates they could have. They explained that the reality of the Metro Vancouver housing market meant that participants often lived with roommates out of necessity.

Staff and program participants noted that participants were not required to leave the program once they reached a certain age. Staff said that supports were available to participants for as long as they needed them, and participants described this as a strength of the program.

### Housing Supports

BC Housing rental subsidies are provided to some participants (a maximum of \$450 a month), which can be used for up to 12 months. They can be extended beyond 12 months if there is a reasonable explanation as to why the subsidy needs to continue. Staff added that the program tries to provide participants with other housing subsidies once they have reached their 12-month mark accessing a subsidy through BC Housing.

In addition, HPS Emergency Housing Funding (EHF) had initially been limited to a maximum of four months. However, this time-frame became more flexible to offer greater temporary support, when needed, to program participants who are waiting to access a rent subsidy through BC Housing or are waiting to stabilize with employment income.

Staff said that due to increases in program funding over the past few years, the program has been able to cover storage fees (e.g., if a participant is evicted and needs to store their belongings), moving fees, and damage deposits.

Staff explained that Aunt Leah's Place does not own any housing units of their own which they could rent to program participants. Instead, they support participants to find places to live. For example, they help them access rental listings; provide letters of reference; and provide tenancy education. Aunt Leah's is also involved in the Friendly Landlord Network which connects landlords to youth who need housing in Metro Vancouver. Through the Friendly Landlord Network, Aunt Leah's supports landlords' relationships with each youth tenant connected to the *Link: Housing First* program, to facilitate a positive rental experience. In addition, some program participants have been able to secure housing through Aunt Leah's Foundation—a separate organization from Aunt Leah's Place. The Foundation

owns a small apartment building (Telford building) and three houses (for young mothers and their children) that some program participants live in.

In the focus group, participants said that the housing subsidy they received through the program was instrumental in helping them to find and maintain housing. They also appreciated the reference letters they could get from program staff to help them find housing. Once they were housed, participants were offered furniture, household items, and supplies through the program (e.g., cooking utensils, shampoo). They also noted that Aunt Leah's has a large warehouse with clothing they can access.

### **Supports Beyond Housing**

Along with the housing supports they have received through the program, focus group participants said they received emotional support from staff. They particularly appreciated that staff reached out to participants who had not recently connected with the program. Participants explained that youth valued this gesture, especially those struggling with mental health challenges, because it demonstrated to them that staff genuinely cared. Focus group participants also appreciated the social events and activities that Aunt Leah's organized because it helped them feel connected to the program and to others.

Consistent with program participants' comments, staff and program partners said that *Link: Housing First* supports participants not only with housing but also in other areas, such as accessing needed services and accessing employment and education supports. For example, participants have access to Aunt Leah's SEFFY program (education supports) and Bootstraps program (which allows them to work one-on-one with an employment worker), and a partnership with WorkBC has also enabled youth to meet with a case management worker who offers employment support.

Staff and partners said the program offers mental health and substance use counselling at Aunt Leah's through a partnership with Dan's Legacy, as well as health services through a nurse practitioner who visits Aunt Leah's once a week. In addition, Aunt Leah's hosts weekly skills workshops, where participants can learn a range of skills and receive a \$10 honorarium for attending. Focus group participants mentioned the various workshops that were offered, including learning about their rental rights and responsibilities; home repairs; and self-care. Participants also voiced appreciation for the opportunities to complete certificates, such as in first aid and forklift training.

In addition to having supports and services available at Aunt Leah's, staff have carried out home visits to support program participants. There is also a peer support worker who has helped program participants in various ways (e.g., obtaining ID, getting to appointments).

Staff discussed the importance of addressing food security among participants and of supporting them to access healthy food. They said the program contributes to the food security of participants, such as by partnering with Dan's Legacy to provide food from a grocery store that would otherwise go to waste. Aunt Leah's also offers free meals three times a week which they invite program participants to attend.

### **Additional Feedback from Program Participants**

Focus group participants said that the three main factors which have motivated them to stay involved in the program have been the financial support they received, a sense of stability they experienced through the program, and the "family vibe" and connectedness they felt.

All survey respondents felt the *Link: Housing First* program has helped them at least a little, including 83% who felt the program has been quite a bit or very helpful (none felt the program has been

unhelpful). When asked to explain, many expressed gratitude that the program has supported them in various ways (e.g., emotionally, financially), and some identified the support they received with finding housing and helping them pay their rent (through a housing subsidy) as particularly helpful.

**What survey participants found helpful in the support they received through the program...**

*"I found being able to talk to staff any day of the week is so helpful and I appreciate it a lot."*

*"Having someone to discuss options with and receive emotional and financial support."*

*"The financial aspect, housing subsidy, dinners and food, and overall support."*

*"They help cover my rent."*

*"Not having to stress about if I'm going to have [enough money for] rent."*

*"Bus tickets, food, clothes, support."*

*"There isn't enough room here to say how much Aunt Leah's has been helpful."*

*"I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for Aunt Leah's."*

Participants who took part in a focus group or completed a survey were asked if the *Link: Housing First* program was different from other housing programs they had been involved in. Some indicated they had never been involved in other housing programs so could not comment. Others suggested this program was better due to having no age limit, as opposed to other programs that had an age cut-off (e.g., 19 or 25 years old).

Focus group participants also commented that this housing program was different from others because there were fewer rules, which they appreciated. For example, they were allowed to bring their own furniture into their rental, which had not been the case in other programs, and this helped to make their place feel like a home. Participants also noted they felt a strong connection to this program, unlike other housing programs they had been involved in. They added that staff took the time to view rentals with program participants, and staff were dependable and genuinely cared about them.

**Other feedback about *Link: Housing First*...**

*"This [housing program] is the best and they take time to look at places with you."*

*"They support you as long as you need it. There is no age where you 'age-out.'"*

*"I like that they check in when I go AWOL."*

*"This program actually helps with financial needs and food/dinners and things I truly need."*

*"The people at Aunt Leah's Housing First program make things so much easier for me because when I am stuck or need something important, I can always go to them and be supported."*

## Landlords' Experience

Landlords who were interviewed described their experience with renting to young people connected to *Link: Housing First* as very positive. They felt that program staff were successful in preparing participants to be “good tenants,” including paying their rent on time or giving advance notice if they would be late and then paying as soon as they could; keeping the place clean; and being respectful of their neighbours. Some program participants had taken initiative to clean up around their building, which the landlord appreciated. Landlords who were interviewed also appreciated that program staff could act as mediator between the landlord and youth if needed.

Landlords described feeling very supported by Aunt Leah's staff. They also appreciated receiving regular emails from Aunt Leah's with useful tips and information. For example, past emails have highlighted where landlords could purchase affordable light fixtures or where they could acquire affordable cable packages.

They said their positive experiences renting to youth in the program, and with program staff, have been the reason they have continued to rent to young people connected to Aunt Leah's. They added that they would recommend to other landlords to get involved with this Housing First program because it would help more young people from care to find housing. However, they acknowledged that not all landlords would be an appropriate fit. They felt that those who were caring, patient, wanted to support young people, and had a good understanding of youth would be the ideal landlords for getting involved with *Link: Housing First* and the Friendly Landlord Network.

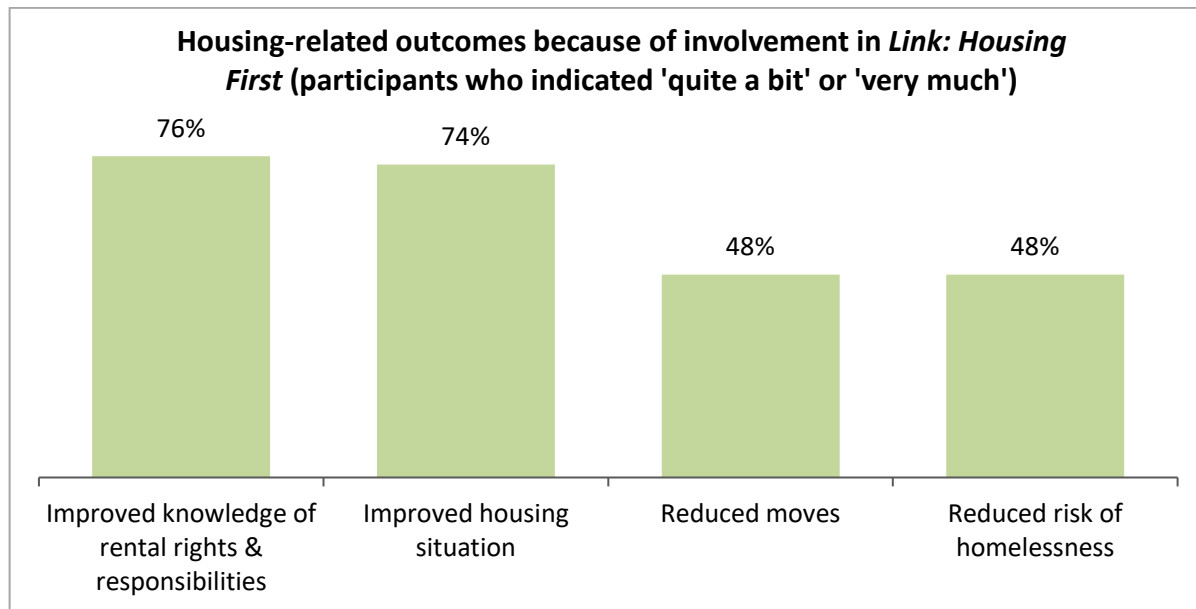
## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

### Housing Situation

*"I went from being homeless with nothing to having an apartment filled with furniture."*

*"I would still be homeless today [if not for this program]."*

Most survey respondents reported that their involvement in *Link: Housing First* has helped quite a bit or very much to improve their housing situation and their knowledge of their rental rights and responsibilities. Most also reported that their involvement has helped, at least a little, to lower their moves from one housing situation to another (95%) and their risk of homelessness (96%).



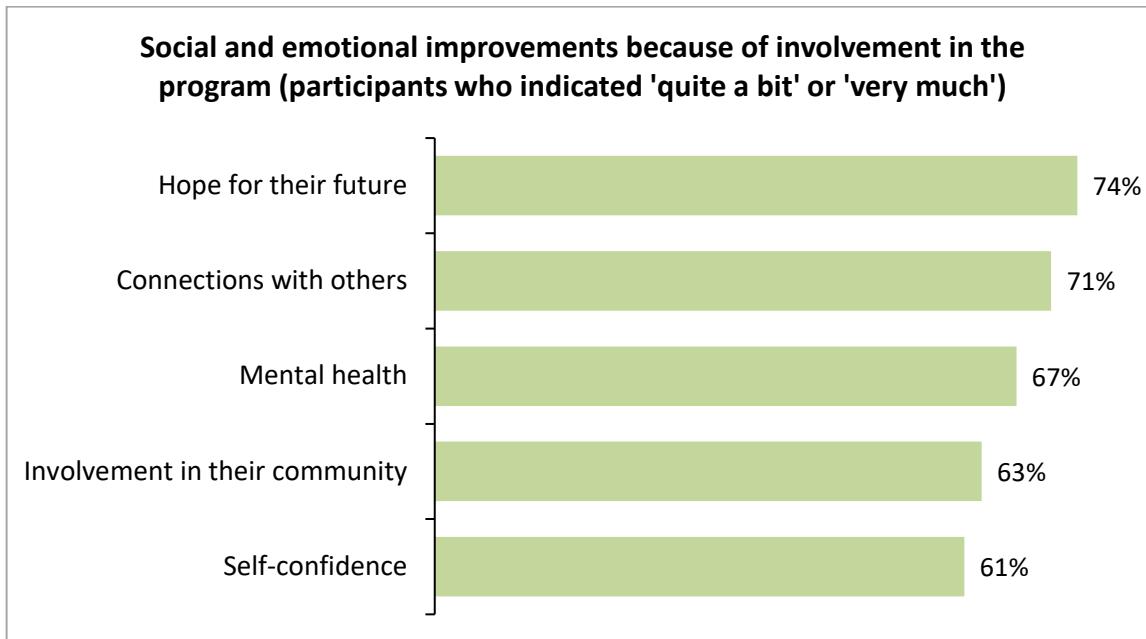
Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

Feedback from focus group participants was consistent with the survey findings. Some remarked that the *Link: Housing First* program helped them to transition out of homelessness, and felt they would still be homeless if not for the support they received through the program. Participants felt the housing subsidy they received through the program was key in helping them to maintain housing.

### Social & Emotional Well-being

Focus group participants explained that the sense of connection they gained through involvement in the program (e.g., through social events and activities that Aunt Leah's hosted), and the emotional support they received from program staff, helped to improve their emotional well-being and stability.

Similarly, most survey respondents reported improvements in their well-being, including overall mental health, hopefulness, and confidence, as well as their social connections and engagement in their community, which they attributed to their involvement in *Link: Housing First*.



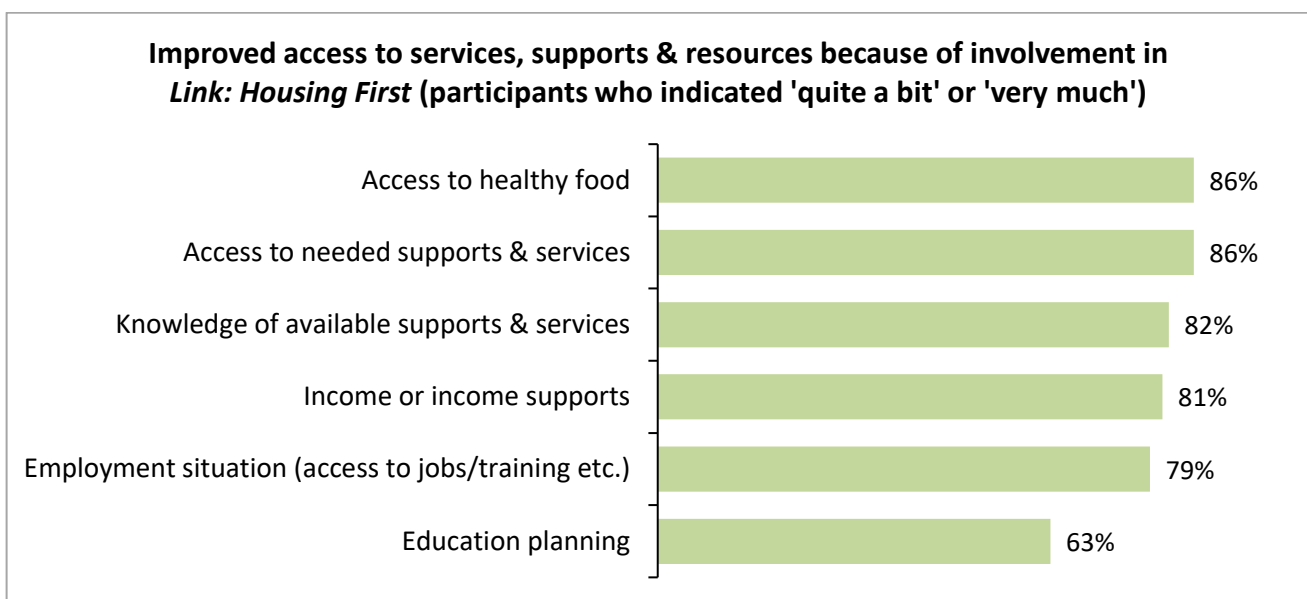
Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

The majority also reported some reductions in their illegal activity and substance use (79% reported at least a little reduction in each; among those who indicated these activities applied to them).

### Connections to Services & Supports

*“The program connected me to [staff] at WorkBC which has been helpful.”*

Survey respondents reported improved knowledge of available supports and services because of their involvement in the program. They also reported greater access to needed services and supports, including income supports, education planning, and employment-related supports (e.g., access to jobs, job training).



Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

In the focus group, participants explained that involvement in the program helped to improve their employment situation because staff had informed them of job opportunities which they applied for and were successful in securing. Some had also worked at Aunt Leah's tree lot, selling trees during the holiday season. Some also mentioned that program staff have helped them with accessing education supports and enrolling in school programs.

## Skill Development

When asked about skill improvements because of their involvement in the program, survey respondents most commonly identified marked improvements in housing-related skills, including finding housing, keeping their housing, and communicating with landlords.

Most also reported improved skills in stress management and coping with challenges; setting and achieving their goals; time management; cooking; and maintaining healthy relationships. Most participants who were parenting also identified improved parenting skills because of their involvement in the program.

Around half of participants reported improved skills in budgeting, cleaning/housekeeping, finding or keeping a job, and healthy living (e.g., sleeping well, eating healthy, exercising).

<b>Skill improvements which participants attributed to their involvement in the program (those who indicated 'quite a bit' or 'very much' improvement)</b>	
Keeping housing	76%
Communicating with landlords	76%
Finding housing	71%
Coping with life challenges	67%
Stress management	64%
Cooking	62%
Time management	62%
Reaching their goals	62%
Setting goals	61%
Parenting skills (among young parents)	58%
Maintaining healthy relationships	57%
Budgeting/money management	52%
Cleaning, housekeeping	52%
Finding or keeping a job	52%
Healthy living (sleeping well, eating healthy, etc.)	52%

Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

## **SUCSESSES, CHALLENGES, & LESSONS LEARNED**

Staff and partner agencies discussed successes and challenges connected to the program, as well as lessons learned through their involvement with *Link: Housing First*.

### **Housing Youth from Care**

Staff said this Housing First program is unique in its focus on supporting youth from government care to find stable housing. They also regarded the rate at which youth are housed through the program as a program success, and estimated that the program has successfully supported around one youth each month to find housing. They highlighted that the program has been successful in housing the hardest-to-house young people.

However, a major challenge has been the shortage of safe and affordable housing in Greater Vancouver. Staff commented that many adults in Vancouver have struggled with the cost of rent, and this struggle is compounded among youth from care who often experience other challenges (mental health, difficulties with daily life-skills, unstable employment, etc.).

Further, a core premise of Housing First is that housing needs to be available for the model to be successful, and the housing situation in Greater Vancouver has created challenges to properly implement the model. Another core principle of Housing First is the importance of offering clients some choice in the type of housing they receive, yet the housing market in Greater Vancouver has provided program participants with little choice and they often must accept whatever housing is available.

Staff and partners who were interviewed said their involvement in this program has reinforced to them the importance and benefits that housing can have on youth's mental health. They have also come to realize that there are many reasons a youth from care might lose their housing, including substance use and mental health challenges. Further, when a youth loses their housing it is not always due to individual challenges they have experienced or to any mistakes they have made, but could be a result of external circumstances. For example, youth might lose their housing due to the landlord/owner deciding to carry out renovations or to sell the accommodation. Staff realized that it was relatively easy for young people to become homeless, particularly given the current housing market.

### **Offering Trauma-Informed, Flexible Supports**

Another identified strength of the program was its flexible and trauma-informed approach to working with youth from care. Staff's involvement with the program highlighted to them that sometimes youth were not ready to find housing or to access services, and it was important to understand a young person's situation and experiences and to be flexible in the supports they offered. For example, it was important to engage in outreach work with program participants who needed it, rather than expecting youth to attend a meeting in an office setting. Staff and partners stressed the value of relationship-building with program participants.

### **Landlord Engagement**

Staff regarded the relationships that Aunt Leah's developed and maintained with landlords as a program success. Staff also felt Aunt Leah's helped to raise awareness among landlords and others in the community about youth from care, and to reduce negative stereotypes associated with young renters.

Staff realized it was important to ensure that the landlords felt appreciated because they were supporting vulnerable youth and made a decision to charge less rent than they could in the current market.

Although the program has been successful in engaging landlords, an ongoing challenge has been to engage a greater number of landlords to increase housing availability for youth from care. Staff came to realize that more needs to be done to raise awareness of the challenges that youth from care experience (including homelessness), and to encourage more landlords to rent to this group of young people.

### **Wrap-around Services & Partnerships**

Staff and partners said a program success is that it supports participants not only with housing but also in other areas (e.g., education, employment, mental health), which helps them to feel stable and connected. They felt that Housing First should not exist in a silo, and that program participants should have access to a wide range of supports and services, even if they have not yet found housing.

A lesson learned was the importance of developing as many partnerships as possible with other agencies so that the Housing First program could offer participants wrap-around supports that extend beyond their agency (e.g., to allow participants to access supports that Aunt Leah's does not offer). Staff felt the *Link: Housing First* program has been successful in developing these partnerships and in offering such wrap-around supports (including supports for youth with FASD and for those who experienced sexual violence).

### **Staff Training & Support**

The intensive training that program staff have needed to understand how the program operates was identified as a challenge, along with the steep learning curve that staff have experienced. Aunt Leah's staff said they have learned the importance of not only taking the time to properly train staff as soon as they join the program but also of hosting regular meetings for all program staff, on an on-going basis. They felt these meetings have improved communication among staff members, and have given them an opportunity to debrief and problem-solve.

Staff who were interviewed realized how challenging and stressful the work can be, and that program staff need support with professional development and self-care, including learning about trauma and managing their vicarious trauma.

### **Eligibility & Reporting**

Staff said that when the program first started it took time for them to understand and apply the HPS Housing First eligibility criteria, which adhered to rigid definitions of homelessness and excluded many youth from care from joining *Link: Housing First*. Over time, the criteria have broadened to become more inclusive of youth at risk of homelessness, although staff felt the criteria could be further expanded to consider each youth's need, so that more at-risk youth from care could qualify to join the program. In addition, staff and partners described the Housing First reporting requirements as challenging and time-consuming, and the financial reporting as particularly labour-intensive.

Staff said they learned the value of developing a strong relationship with the HPS project officer, and of the officer gaining a solid understanding of their organization and the program. They explained that this relationship can assist with navigating eligibility and reporting challenges. They also learned the value of involving a third party (e.g., VanCity) to oversee the program's administration.

## **Funding**

Staff said that over the course of implementation of the program, they have received additional funding to focus on components they had been previously unable to attend to. They mentioned staff training as an example, as well as the ability to create a peer support-worker position which they described as a strength of the program. They added that while funding has increased, the program still has insufficient funds, including for staffing (support workers) to better support program participants.

## **EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS**

### **Suggestions for the Program**

Survey respondents and focus group participants were asked open-ended questions about whether there were any supports they had not yet received through the program which they wanted to access, and if they had any suggestions to improve the program. Many stated they were receiving all the supports they needed, and they had no suggestions because they were satisfied with how the program was operating.

Other program participants offered the following suggestions:

- Offer more one-on-one support with learning life-skills, including budgeting and money-management.
- Offer more check-ins for participants who want them.
- More staff should have the proper license or insurance required to drive participants, such as to appointments or to shop for groceries.
- Harm-reduction could be better supported. For example, participants should be allowed to keep their substance use equipment, such as bongs, rather than have them confiscated. When confiscated, there is a greater likelihood that participants will engage in riskier substance use.
- More funding is needed so that program participants can receive the supports they need (e.g., for school and training programs; gift cards for groceries; greater access to bus tickets; and access to a phone).

Staff also felt that more funding is needed to increase staffing so that participants can receive the one-on-one support they need. More funding would also help participants access the resources they need to achieve stability.

Landlords were asked if there was anything Aunt Leah's could do to better support landlords connected to the program. Those who were interviewed had no suggestions because they were satisfied with the support offered.

## **Recommendations for the Housing Model**

### ***Suggestions from program staff, partners, and landlords***

Aunt Leah's staff, partners, and landlords offered suggestions for how the housing model could change to better support youth from care:

- There should be greater flexibility in the Housing First eligibility criteria, such as by not excluding youth who couch surf. The criteria should also place less importance on the amount of time a youth has been homeless, and more emphasis on preventing homelessness by including younger youth at risk of homelessness.
- The reporting requirements for expenses should be re-structured to become less onerous.
- Increasing the amount of each rent subsidy would give program participants more housing options. Also, further increasing the duration of the subsidy (beyond 12 months) would support participants to maintain housing stability.
- Some expressed that the Housing First model is not viable in Greater Vancouver due to the housing market. A suggestion was to increase the availability of temporary modular housing.
- Partners felt it could be beneficial for a housing program to own a building to house program participants. Advantages of owning such a building would be that program participants would have an easier time securing housing and that services and supports could be offered to participants inside the building. To address loneliness among youth, a communal space within the building could be created, or separate communal housing accommodations could be offered.
- Landlords felt that in order for more landlords to rent to young people, including those from care, a system needs to be in place which guarantees compensation to landlords who experience a loss due to renting to youth (e.g., resulting from not paying rent or from damages).
- Landlords could share their positive experiences renting to young people, which could encourage other landlords to do the same, and help to combat the negative perceptions and stereotypes relating to young people. It could also be helpful to disseminate research which demonstrates that youth can be reliable tenants.

### ***Program participants' suggestions***

Participants who took part in a focus group were asked what their housing program would look like if they could design their own program. Their suggestions included the following:

- Participants would be offered more housing options so they could exercise more choice in where they live. Expanding the Friendly Landlord Network could help with increasing the housing stock.
- The program would own some housing, such as a building with units which could be rented to program participants.
- There would be a community room or communal space within program participants' building, for participants to connect with one another. One participant commented that the laundry room in their building was currently the only communal space and they wished there was an alternative space for people to socialize.

- Participants said that many youth became homeless because they did not want to surrender their pet, and having more pet-friendly rentals would help to mitigate this situation.
- Each participant should be treated on a case-by-case basis, and the program should not adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. Offering individualized support is helpful in supporting participants to achieve their goals and stability.
- Participants would be supported to gain skills and knowledge relating to living independently, such as how to resolve conflicts with roommates; tenancy rights and responsibilities; job skills; and other skills to help them maintain their housing (cleaning, budgeting, etc.).

Survey participants were also asked what should be included in a housing program for youth from care. They most commonly identified a housing subsidy, followed by support to develop life-skills. A minority felt that such a housing program should have rules that ban substance use, restrict visitors, and require home visits by staff.

<b>What survey respondents felt should be included in a housing program for youth from government care</b>	
Rent subsidy	87%
Support with life-skills (money management, cooking, etc.)	83%
Supportive worker	78%
Support with making a place feel like home (help with furnishing, etc.)	78%
Learning about tenancy rights and responsibilities	78%
Support communicating with landlord	78%
Help with making a back-up plan in case housing falls through	78%
Education support	78%
No age limit	74%
Support with setting meaningful goals	74%
Support with reaching goals	74%
Help applying for income supports (Income Assistance, disability benefits, etc.)	74%
Employment support	74%
Access to legal advice	70%
Support connecting to meaningful activities (to reduce boredom and loneliness)	70%
Access to mental health support	70%
An approach that supports safer substance use	70%
Support with parenting or childcare	70%
Support with making an emergency plan (fire, earthquakes, etc.)	61%
Learning about how to be a good roommate	61%
Rules that ban substance use	44%
Rules that restrict visitors	35%
Home visits by staff	35%

Note. Respondents could mark all that applied.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Findings from this evaluation demonstrate that Aunt Leah's *Link: Housing First* program has adhered to many components of the Housing First model for adults and for youth (HF4Y) that have been deemed best practices for addressing homelessness. For example, an identified strength of the program, and a best practice in Housing First, has been its partnerships and collaboration with other programs and agencies so that participants can receive wrap-around supports that best meet their needs.

Further, the program has offered participants supports beyond housing, which is consistent with the Housing First tenet that to achieve housing stability it is important to not only house clients but to also facilitate their access to a range of supports and services in the community to enhance their overall well-being. The *Link: Housing First* program has extended beyond the original Housing First model by offering youth from care opportunities to take part in workshops, training, and skill-development, in recognition of the on-going support that youth from care often need to develop their skills and knowledge. These opportunities, such as involvement in life-skills workshops and *Ready to Rent* training, can help participants gain the skills and knowledge they need to achieve housing stability.

Most program participants reported greater involvement in their community and improved connections to others because of their involvement in the program, which follows the Housing First principle of offering opportunities for social inclusion and community integration. Moreover, the program has gone beyond the original model by hosting events and activities, and offering communal meals on a regular basis, for participants to connect socially with other young people from care and to experience a sense of community. This emphasis on connections and relationships has helped youth from care to feel a sense of belonging which many would otherwise not experience.

Aunt Leah's flexible approach—and the program's focus on building relationships with participants to gain a better understanding of their strengths and needs—is in line with the Housing First principle of offering individualized and client-centered supports, and of the HF4Y principle of giving youth a say in the supports they receive. Also, Aunt Leah's trauma-informed approach—including recognizing that it can take time for youth from care to develop trusting relationships due to past traumas, and supporting staff to manage their vicarious trauma—converges with the HF4Y model's emphasis on trauma-informed care. In addition, Aunt Leah's philosophy and practice of supporting youth from care for as long as they need it, with no age cut-offs, is consistent with the philosophy of the HF4Y model of offering supports with no time-limits. Participants identified the absence of an age cut-off as an aspect of the *Link: Housing First* program that positively differentiated it from other housing programs they had taken part in.

Other identified strengths of the program—specifically, the availability of peer support and an emphasis on developing relationships with landlords—have also been identified as strengths in previous research on Housing First (Canham et al., 2017; Gaetz et al., 2013).

A harm-reduction approach is typically implemented in Housing First programs (Gaetz, 2017), and most survey respondents in this evaluation felt that a housing program for youth from care should adopt an approach that supports safer substance use. Youth in the focus group suggested that the *Link: Housing First* program could do more to support harm-reduction among program participants who use substances.

Lack of affordable housing in Greater Vancouver has created barriers for the program to adhere to two core principles of the Housing First model, namely of offering participants immediate access to permanent housing and of offering them some choice in the type of housing they receive. A strength of the program is that it has expanded the original Housing First model to offer participants a wide range of supports and services even before they secure housing. Further, there is flexibility in the type

of accommodation that participants may secure through the program, including living with roommates to reduce costs. Evaluation participants felt it was important for a housing model for youth from care to include supports to help participants live with roommates (e.g., conflict-resolution skill development).

The *Link: Housing First* program has been able to offer supports to youth from care who are at risk of homelessness as well as to those who are homeless, due to a shift in the HPS Housing First eligibility criteria. This shift has enabled the program to contribute to reducing the risk of chronic homelessness among youth from care, who are over-represented among the homeless population. Evaluation participants saw this as a positive step but felt that HPS could do more to expand the eligibility criteria and to address homelessness prevention.

In sum, the *Link: Housing First* program has adapted the core components of the Housing First models for adults and for youth (HF4Y) and applied them to support youth from government care. Aunt Leah's has worked within the parameters of the Housing First eligibility criteria and funding structure to best support program participants. The program has also developed some additions to the original models, including offering participants supports before they have found housing; providing opportunities for participants to connect socially with other young people from care and helping to create a sense of community; and offering life-skills development and training opportunities to reduce the risk of chronic homelessness and to increase the likelihood of housing stability among youth from government care.

## **SUMMARY & CONCLUSION**

Evaluation findings indicated that Aunt Leah's *Link: Housing First* program has served the intended group of youth from government care who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Program participants experienced challenges to finding and keeping housing, and this evaluation identified supports which can help youth from care to achieve housing stability. A rent subsidy was the most commonly identified support which has helped survey respondents to find and maintain housing. Evaluation participants recommended that the amount of the rent subsidy and the length of time that each participant could access it should be increased, in order to help expand youth's housing options and to increase their likelihood of achieving housing stability. Other Housing First evaluations (Canham et al., 2017) also identified the importance of offering participants longer-term financial assistance (longer-term rent subsidies), to increase their likelihood of successful outcomes.

Support to develop life-skills was the second most commonly identified component which survey respondents felt should be included in a housing program. Many felt they had gained skills through *Link: Housing First* (e.g., most felt they had gained skills to find and maintain housing and to communicate with landlords), but they also felt they could be further supported to develop life-skills, such as budgeting and housekeeping, on a one-to-one basis with staff. Also, problems with roommates was participants' most commonly identified challenge to maintaining housing, and gaining skills relating to living with roommates (including conflict-resolution) was recognized as important.

Program staff indicated that more funding is necessary for participants to receive the one-on-one support they need, including to gain life-skills to increase their likelihood of housing stability. They said that more funding is also needed to help participants access other resources to achieve stability.

Evaluation findings demonstrated that the *Link: Housing First* program has successfully adapted the Housing First model to support youth from government care, despite the challenging housing market in Greater Vancouver. The program has contributed to improvements in participants' lives, in the areas of housing stability, life-skills, social and emotional well-being, education and employment. Youth participants have valued the sense of connection and community they have experienced because of their involvement in the program, which can contribute to their stability and well-being into adulthood.

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# *The Link*

*Housing First*



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This evaluation was funded by the Victoria Foundation and the Adoption & Permanency Fund of BC



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