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Compass project helps give homeless teens direction

Teen homelessness in central Massachusetts is a problem that continues to grow. In 2010, a survey of Worcester teens by Clark University and the Worcester Teen Housing Task Force found that an astounding 20% reported experiencing homelessness at some point in the last year. Locally, multiple partners including the City of Worcester, local funders, community-based service providers, academics, and evaluators such as ICH's Dr. Justeen Hyde are coming together to address this significant public health and social justice problem for teens.

Homelessness among young people is defined in a number of ways, including "couch surfing," "doubling up," or "living on the street."

Young people who are disconnected from their parents or guardians and experience homelessness are more likely to use drugs and alcohol, be exposed to violence and other traumatic events, suffer from mental health problems, and have poor overall health.

Preventing young people from becoming homeless should be a primary goal for every community. Recognizing that identification of young people who are at risk for homelessness is challenging, early intervention services are also needed.

To address teen homelessness before it becomes a chronic problem for teens in later years, the Worcester Teen Housing Task Force and other partner organizations decided to create a system of care to prevent youth homelessness and services to intervene early if teens do become homeless. In 2011, The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts awarded a five-year Synergy Grant to a network of community providers to develop such a system. Gordon Benson from [LUK, Inc.](#) and Laurie Ross from Clark University have agreed to lead the development of this system of care, with the Justeen Hyde at the Institute of Community Health serving as the lead evaluator.

The first year (2011) of the Synergy Grant was dedicated to conducting a formative needs assessment

and engaging a range of community stakeholders in the development of a model of care. ICH worked in partnership with local stakeholders to review literature to identify best practices, interview providers from across the country to identify successful prevention and early intervention models, conduct focus group interviews with homeless young people and community service providers, and support a local asset mapping of real and potential resources for young people. A striking finding was that lack of prevention models for teen homelessness, making the use of evidence-based practices challenging. However, the formative data collection activities did highlight common risk factors and intervention strategies that have demonstrated some success with young people. The data collected during the formative stage were presented to the Compass Project Steering Committee and used to inform the development of a comprehensive system of care model.

In March of 2012, the Compass Project will formally launch a pilot program to help refine and assess the proposed system of care model.

At the heart of the model is strengths-based case management with community-based wrap around services. "One of the services we are most excited about," says Hyde, "is family mediation." Family conflict is a primary driver of youth homelessness. If conflicts can be negotiated and resolved, young people have a better chance of being able to stay with their families until they are ready to leave home. The system of care also includes a close partnership with the [Worcester Youth Center](#), which provides a range of educational, vocational, and life skills services for youth.

Diversified funding would benefit ICH's work with the Compass Project in a number of ways. First, given the lack of evidence in the literature and other forums for dissemination, ICH could help increase awareness about the need for prevention and create communication strategies for on-going sharing of lessons learned with state and national audiences. Since there are no established models for preventing teen homelessness, this may be one of the first to generate real evidence that it is both possible and worth the investment. Second, Worcester is a relatively new community for ICH to partner with to identify and address public health issues. Hyde believes that support to spend more time in Worcester would "deepen our understanding of local issues and, as a result, learn what it takes to make this systems change sustainable." As it exists, this program will require the coalition of organizations invested in reducing teen homelessness to "harness funding at local and state agencies" to keep this coordinated care and prevention system going.

