

## **YAB Integration**

**1. Description of the YAB's role in the CoC.** Austin Youth Collective (AYC) serves as influential stakeholders and decision makers in Austin's Continuum of Care. AYC's scope of influence has continued to broaden over the years, with a focus on both system-wide issues and connecting the dots across many homelessness response initiatives. AYC, as our community's YAB, receives support from the Austin CoC Collaborative Applicant, ECHO. ECHO provides a staff member, the Community Engagement Manager, whose job description requires ensuring that AYC has training and technical support to do their work, and ECHO provides a budget for AYC for the following: compensation for hours worked; training and professional development, including conferences; miscellaneous costs for AYC-led activities; on-demand ride-share transportation; food for meetings; laptops with damage protection plans; and an emergency fund to support AYC members who have an urgent personal financial need. These budget line items are the result of advocacy from AYC members, present and past, who identified barriers to their success. AYC members also have full use of the ECHO office and meeting spaces.

AYC has an appointed seat on the CoC Board, called Leadership Council, and they are active in the CoC related committees and workgroups. As an example, in 2020, AYC members served on a committee tasked with redesigning the Continuum of Care Board. AYC leadership in that committee ensured that governance authentically engaged AYC in decision-making processes moving forward and since that time, two youth with lived experience have served on the CoC board including chairing the Board this past year. In addition to the CoC board participation, AYC members have served as voting members of Continuum of Care appointed committees, and subject matter experts in various Continuum of Care workgroups.

Listed below are examples to illustrate this point:

- AYC members co-led the Austin Winter Response Collective and were successful in advocating for the CoC Board to identify inclement weather response as priority area for CoC governance. This resulted in crafted policy recommendations and best practices authored by AYC members, government officials, CoC stakeholders, and people with lived experience.
- AYC members participate in monthly governance meetings, and AYC members hold voting seats on 2 CoC appointed committees. In the past, AYC members have also served on the ad-hoc Point in Time Count appointed committee.
- In July 2024, Leadership Council elected an AYC member to serve in the Youth with Lived Expertise CoC board seat; this is the 2nd AYC member to date who has held an elected voting position on the CoC Board.
- AYC members were instrumental in the development of the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT) which replaced the VI-SPDAT and has garnered national attention for its customization to community needs and focus on racial and gender equity.
- AYC members serve on the Independent Review Team (IRT) to review and score applications for notice of funding opportunities released by HUD, including the annual Continuum of Care NOFO; CoC providers often seek AYC counsel and letters of support for funding proposals.
- AYC members have been recognized for their lived expertise, qualifications, and contributions to the CoC; 2 AYC members have accepted full time employment with the CoC Collaborative Applicant ECHO in recent years.
- Today, Leadership Council is considering a board selection proposal sponsored by a former AYC member to transition the elected Youth with Lived Expertise seat into an appointed seat for AYC members on the CoC Board.

**2. Description of YAB membership.** The Austin Youth Collective is currently represented by individuals who have experienced different forms of youth homelessness during different time periods, in different geographies, inside and outside of Texas, as well as some of members still being at risk. The current composition of AYC is reflective of the youth homelessness population in Austin/Travis County. AYC is a diverse body of members representative of subpopulations (i.e., youth of color, non-binary member, gender-questioning, LGBTQ+ member, gender-diverse) AYC is prioritizing recruitment that continues to allow AYC to reflect the diversity of the youth homelessness population.

**a. Description of prevalence of youth of color, LGBTQ+, and gender non-conforming youth.**

Due to the research conducted through a documentary project done in collaboration with AYC and the University of Texas at Austin, we found that many youth experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness in the Austin area are LGBTQ+ and/or represent culturally diverse households. Data from 2023 shows that 17.2% of unhoused youth identify as LGBTQ+ (1.4% gender non-conforming, 16.1% sexual orientation other than heterosexual). In addition, 40.2% identify as Black, 27.2% Hispanic/Latino, 15% multiracial, and 0.6% Indigenous/Native American.

**b. Description of the YAB recruitment process.**

AYC puts significant emphasis on outreach and recruitment of members. Outreach is focused on ensuring that AYC continues to reflect the diversity in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. By leading with their current diversity, they create recruitment content and methodologies that are reflective of their points of view. AYC maintains social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. AYC develops and shares recruitment information flyers on those platforms. In addition, AYC has advertised on the ECHO website and social media platforms. Currently AYC members are in the process of building their own website, which includes a general interest form for potential

applicants for AYC. AYC is also actively recruiting through their peer-networks, social gathering/pro-social activities (e.g., community education during musical performances, etc.) AYC members are involved in the screening and interview process with prospective members as well.

Within our own collective, the AYC, we have all of the groups you mentioned. We have youth of color, Gender non-conforming members and LGBTQ+ members. A goal moving forward if we receive the grant will be to focus our community resources upon those underserved populations with great care.

**3. Description of YAB training opportunities.** Before any member is directly involved in tasks or projects, there is a 30-day shadow period where new members observe and learn the basics of the Homelessness Response System by attending weekly AYC meetings. During this time, and in collaboration with ECHO staff, new AYC members complete training on the HMIS, the Homelessness Response System (including housing types), the Coordinated Entry System, Governance, and Research & Evaluation systems. ECHO ensures that AYC is supported to achieve their objectives, including being properly onboarded and by funding a full-time support staff who serves as the Community Engagement Manager. In addition, ECHO provides funding with line items in the ECHO budget for AYC training and professional development. The Community Engagement Manager works with AYC members to identify professional development and training opportunities, which in the past have included activities such as attending homelessness and youth related conferences and skills classes. This training ensures that AYC members have both the technical knowledge of the homelessness response system and the opportunity to understand the ongoing policy discussions and challenges that the system faces. ECHO and AYC

also support the exit planning goals of AYC members which includes training for employment after transitioning off of AYC.

**4. Description of preparation, debriefing, and support process for youth.** Before any member actively provides feedback or directly becomes involved in tasks or projects, there is a 30-day shadow period where new members will observe and learn the basics of the Homeless Response System by attending weekly meetings and completing onboarding training. After the initial training provided to new AYC members, members are strongly encouraged to participate in anything that interests them. An ECHO staff person provides staff support to AYC and ensures that all AYC members are prepared, debriefed, and supported in all activities, including governance meetings. The Community Engagement Manager either provides this information directly, or connects AYC members with other ECHO staff, organizations or community members that can support their specific efforts. AYC members also offer each other a significant amount of support and training during their weekly meetings and through their collaborative work. The CoC governance also hosts regular meetings for people with lived experience who participate in governance (CoC Board, committees, or workgroups), which includes AYC members, to support their specific needs in governance. Also, ECHO training funds are available, if needed, to support AYC members in their activities.

**5. Description of youth's involvement in the new project design and implementation process.**

The Austin Youth Collective collaborates with many local organizations, along with regular engagement in Leadership Council governance meetings. AYC work in governance board and committee work over the years has provided input and feedback that has resulted in significant policy decisions, including written standards and the updated Coordinated Entry Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool. AYC members were instrumental in securing grant funds from

Point Source Youth (PSY) in 2023 to design and implement a first-of-its-kind direct cash transfer program to prevent youth homelessness. Lifeworks approached AYC in the application phase to hear feedback, secure buy-in, and aid in writing a letter of support. The agency was awarded, and AYC members remain engaged in the program planning phase. An AYC member applied for and was hired as a youth consultant with PSY to work directly with LifeWorks and the Austin/Travis County community to design and implement the program. She brings feedback from the entirety of AYC to the full team designing the program and vice versa.

#### **6. Description of youth-led initiatives outside of applying for grant funds.**

The AYC has led various projects in collaboration with organizations and institutions in the Austin area. Last summer, they hosted a successful community event that brought together many different organizations to create a space for all resources to be found in one location. Since then, the AYC has become involved with the Pop Up Resource Clinic, a monthly resource event that does the same, where they pass out clothes collected by one of our members.

AYC developed and is conducting a combined documentary and research project centered around the patterns and hidden productivity that occur when youth are experiencing different forms of homelessness. Members recruit people to talk about their experiences on camera, and the interviews will be used in a series of short documentary episodes exploring themes that came up across interviews. In addition, AYC partnered with a researcher at the University of Texas at Austin to extract research insights from the interviews they're conducting. This research and documentary series will help expand our CoC's understanding of youth homelessness and the ways in which the community can and should target resources appropriately.

**7. Description of the YAB's compensation process.** The YAB is currently compensated at a rate of \$40/hr. As a result of advocacy by AYC, members increased the number of hours available for

compensation and the flexibility with which members can use them. AYC members are now able to work up to 40 hours per month, and the hours are flexible week to week to accommodate slow and busy weeks. The CoC Collaborative Applicant has taken on responsibility for fundraising to meet these compensation goals. All time and work committed to research and data analysis, governance meetings, community collaboration, individual projects, and any other tasks are to be logged and accounted for. Checks and direct deposits are issued 24 hours after payment invoices are submitted on a weekly basis.

**8. Definition of authentic youth collaboration in our community.** When youth are brought into collaboration with any organization, it should be because their perspective is needed in the space. Active listening with the intentions of understanding and validating the youth's perspective combined with true collaboration that actually implements these perspectives is key to successfully creating together. Ideas should be run by the youth in the space before they are agreed upon or forced upon the youth. When formulating a plan or guidelines for any body of work done together, youth are asked their thoughts and opinions, and these thoughts and opinions are actually valued, considered, and implemented by the adults in the space. Included in this, leadership actively seeks counsel from the YAB surrounding details, policies, standards, or any new changes to be implemented pertaining to youth homelessness for relevancy and equitability. Anything that will affect the youth should have direct involvement and input from selected representatives of the community.

Though they are outside of HUD, Point Source Youth in collaboration with Lifeworks has been a great model of this approach – they actively collaborate with their youth employees, ensuring that they follow the guidance of those they asked to be in the space. Collaborating with youth is more than just a good look for an organization or a stamp of approval for federal funds. It is living,

breathing organizational work that aligns with all parties involved- where everyone's voice and perspective is heard, valued and considered- and youth have the final say on what happens to them. Anything that will affect the youth should have direct involvement and input from selected representatives of the community.

### **Community Need**

**1. Description of most recent youth needs assessment.** ECHO prepares an annual CoC Needs & Gaps report, including data on unaccompanied youth and youth-headed households (24 and under). LifeWorks (lead CoC youth provider) prepares supplemental quarterly YHDP dashboards that include a census of sheltered and unsheltered unhoused youth and system performance data. Data below is from the 2023 Needs & Gaps report and YHDP dashboards.

**A. Number of Unhoused Youth:** In 2023, 1,523 youth (24 and younger) in Austin/Travis County experienced homelessness (1,357 unsheltered, 166 sheltered). Given the complex factors that can lead to youth homelessness, the CoC does not have a definitive number of youth who may be at risk of homelessness. However, recent data from local school districts, foster care, and the justice system indicate that at least 2,000-3,000 youth experience housing instability annually.

**B. Disparities Identified:** The population has a high racial disparity, with 40.2% of unhoused youth identifying as Black and 29.9% as Hispanic/Latino. In Travis County overall, only 8.9% of youth are Black. The over-policing of Black and Brown communities exacerbates the over-representation of Black and Hispanic youth in criminal justice and foster care systems. Of the 1,523 unhoused youth, 36.8% of youth reported criminal justice and 56.8% foster care involvement. LGBTQIA2S+ youth represent 17.2% of unhoused youth. In 2023, 141 anti-LGBTQIA2S+ bills were filed in the Texas legislature, contributing to a hostile environment for



LGBTQIA2S+ youth and increasing risk factors associated with youth homelessness and mental health challenges. Only 0.5% of unhoused youth reported positive HIV/AIDS status.

**C. Key Findings:** Community data shows that outreach and Coordinated Entry (CE) are effectively engaging and identifying youth. The census consistently shows that over 90% of identified youth have completed CE and are on the by-name list. However, HRS permanent housing resources are insufficient to meet youth needs. The 2023 Housing Inventory Count showed 200 youth permanent housing beds (scattered-site Rapid Rehousing) and 60 youth emergency shelter beds, but there were 696 youth on the by-name list as of December 2023. Additional youth-designated permanent beds are needed critically, as demand across all age groups and subpopulations exceeds current resources. These data also show a need for additional upstream prevention work to stem the number of youth losing housing so the HRS can more rapidly move youth to permanent housing and reduce how long they experience unsheltered homelessness.

**D. Youth Involvement.** Members of Austin Youth Collective (CoC YAB) serve on CoC committees that inform annual reviews of system needs and gaps, but our CoC has identified a need to elevate youth involvement in community assessments. We will utilize the YHDP community planning process to identify the structure and resources needed to conduct ongoing youth-specific needs and gaps assessments to inform decision-making around youth issues.

**2. Youth-Focused Intervention.** Consultations with youth with lived experience and community providers indicate that existing youth housing interventions serve youth well but need additional resources and capacity. Unhoused youth wait an average of 335 days to find permanent housing. Once in a program, youth also want more robust wraparound social services, especially workforce development/education and mental health support. There is strong need for parent-friendly employment options (approximately half of unhoused youth are parenting), and Peer Support is

strongly desired to reduce stigma and distrust around mental health services. Youth also indicate a need for flexible financial assistance to address increased cost of living and other expenses including medicine/medical care, furniture and linens, children's supplies, childcare, education and legal expenses. Youth report that these costs have lasting impacts on their financial stability and housing retention. Expanding these services will require additional sustainable funding and/or systems partnerships, which the CoC will work to identify and secure through YHDP planning.

**3. Factors contributing to youth homelessness.** The CoC identifies factors driving youth homelessness through research studies, analyses of HMIS and community data, and collaborations with youth systems and providers. A Voices of Youth Count survey (2017) conducted with Chapin Hall revealed a high prevalence of justice system (66%) and foster care involvement (37%), pregnant or parenting youth (56%), LGBTQIA2S+ youth (23%), and mental health challenges (56%) among unhoused Travis County youth. Further collaborations with youth developing the 2017 YHDP Coordinated Community Plan pointed to how these factors can lead to housing loss through family conflict and rejection, disconnection from social supports, lack of preparation for independent living, and inability to participate in work or school. Among these factors, the CoC identified the overrepresentation of youth of color among systems-involved and parenting youth. Current data show these factors remain key drivers of youth homelessness. Increased cost of living and failure of wages to keep pace have emerged as additional drivers of housing instability and loss. There are only 21 affordable units for every 100 low-income renters in Travis County and 2-bedroom FMR rents are \$1,924.<sup>1</sup> Texas provides few renter protections, and weekly eviction filings rapidly rose beyond pre-pandemic levels after national eviction protections expired in 2022. The Texas minimum wage remains \$7.25/hour. Low wages increase housing barriers, especially if youth face ongoing costs related to childcare, mental health, or chronic health conditions.

**4. Addressing needs of BIPOC and other overrepresented groups.** Striking disparities are observed among Black youth, who comprise 40.2% of unhoused youth versus 8.9% of Travis County youth overall, and multiracial youth (15% unhoused, 8.4% general population). Youth with lived experience have participated directly in strategies to advance racial equity, including 1) developing a new CE assessment, Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool, which includes measures designed to equitably prioritize BIPOC individuals, and 2) developing new RRH and PSH program scorecards (to be implemented late 2024) that will assess if any outcome has a 10% or greater disparity between BIPOC and white participants. The CoC has improved CE collaboration with jails and Juvenile Probation, where youth of color are overrepresented, to prevent discharges into homelessness, and works with private landlords, public housing, and service providers to develop low-barrier screening criteria and mitigate the impact of criminal records on youth's ability to secure housing. The CoC conducted a qualitative study and published a 2023 report identifying key barriers the Black unhoused community experiences in accessing the HRS, including the need for providers to build trust with participants grounded in lived experience and compassion. The Equity Committee, which reports to the CoC Board, is currently advancing the following disparity reduction efforts: 1) ensuring HRS governance represents the population served, 2) expanded CoC outreach in areas with high concentrations of Black unsheltered people, 3) CoC trainings for service providers on racism in the HRS, 4) robust engagement of Black-led service providers to improve the HRS, 5) expanded low-barrier funding for Black-led organizations, and 6) CoC-led research to understand the needs and experiences of Black unsheltered people.

**5. Addressing needs of LGBTQIA2S+ youth.** LGBTQIA2S+-led organizations and individuals participate in CoC governance, and a CoC Equity Committee workgroup has developed policies and best practices for providers working with LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. CoC Board feedback

resulted in a scored question in the 2023 CoC Program Local Competition for projects to describe how they address safety for LGBTQIA2S+ clients. New Quarterly Performance Scorecards solicit client feedback to ensure CoC services affirm LGBTQIA2S+ clients and address privacy, safety, and access needs. Key shelters, including LifeWorks youth shelter and Urban Alchemy's central downtown shelter, have established spaces, policies, and staff training to increase comfort and safety of gender expansive people seeking shelter. The CoC's commitment to scattered-site housing and cultivation of landlord relationships creates as much choice as possible to help people find permanent housing that feels affirmative and safe to them. The CoC has HMIS ROI agreements with key LGBTQIA2S+ healthcare and support organizations, including AshWELL Clinic, Sex Workers Educating and Empowering Texans, and Queertopia, to increase coordinated care and support. LifeWorks Street Outreach and Youth Resource Center (key HRS points of entry for youth) work with Out Youth to connect LGBTQIA2S+ youth to social support and counseling.

**6. Building on previous YHDP projects.** With YHDP funds, the community has created improved pathways for unhoused youth to access critical services and be involved in CoC planning. The CoC launched three new programs: Rapid Rehousing Plus, PORT (joint TH-RRH), and Diversion. YHDP also initiated a community-wide effort to update CE to be youth-focused, and elevated youth leadership through the YAB. There is a need for additional funds now to expand existing services and explore new approaches to prevent homelessness because dramatic increases in the cost of living and a severe lack of affordable housing have led to more youth entering homelessness than anticipated during initial YHDP planning. ECHO and community partners will use the momentum from the previous funding and insights gathered through robust data collection and continuous quality improvement efforts to expand the positive impact of initial YHDP projects.

ECHO and the CoC are well positioned to improve youth-focused programs and elevate the leadership of youth with lived experience in the community. Youth involvement is central to the planning of these resources and will be encouraged to take larger roles in program development. Through their input, community partners learned that scattered-site, apartment-based programs are preferable to youth and thus successful. ECHO will encourage applicants to pursue programs that align with the community's Housing-First and Youth Choice principles. To build on this progress, ECHO anticipates leveraging youth input and leadership and engaging a wider web of community partners to reach youth who may have been reticent to access services and create a more responsive system to address growing needs.

**7. Impact of previous YHDP planning and projects.** Since launching YHDP services in 2018, the community has permanently housed 1,576 youth, with 647 housed directly through YHDP. Of the youth successfully housed at program exit, 64.2% remain housed long-term. The HRS has leveraged YHDP and other resources to increase youth-dedicated permanent housing beds from 23 to 311, with significant recent expansion through FUP/FYI vouchers. YHDP special activities helped the community expand youth choice in housing and reduce housing barriers. YHDP also spurred the creation of a YAB that elevated youth leadership in the community, and increased commitments to youth voice among CoC providers, including LifeWorks creation of paid youth advisor positions and pathways to hiring youth with lived experience through its Impactful Voices program. The community also leveraged non-HUD resources to scale up workforce development, peer support, and counseling services tailored for unhoused youth, which help young people maximize their time in housing programs and build long-term stability.

To sustain this impact, the CoC continues to partner with Austin Youth Collective to increase youth leadership in the CoC and broader homelessness response system. Key providers are

pursuing innovative pilot projects to ensure a robust continuum of youth-focused services spanning upstream prevention work to permanent housing programs. The community has collaborated to ensure system expansions supported by ARPA relief funds can be sustained as these funds sunset, such as integrating FUP/FYI vouchers into HRS programs to maximize the number of youth who can be served. A youth-dedicated housing navigation team at LifeWorks continues to develop landlord relationships and diversified housing opportunities. The community is well positioned to build on this momentum with additional YHDP resources to scale up approaches that are working and identify new collaborations and creative opportunities to address gaps and unmet needs.

### **Collaboration**

**1. CoC's work with Public Housing Agencies (PHAs).** The CoC collaborates with both PHAs within the CoC, the Housing Authorities of the City of Austin (HACA) and Travis County (HATC). The CoC Board maintains a PHA seat and both PHAs are actively engaged in CoC governance committees and workgroups. Both PHAs allocate 25% of their overall HCV programs to the homeless preference in their CoC administrative plans and MOUs. The CoC works with the PHAs to ensure housing placement processes and support services adhere to Housing First and Harm Reduction. Coordinated Entry (CE) includes units from the following PHA programs: Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH), Family Unification Program (FUP), and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI). The CoC has leveraged these partnerships to build a robust FUP/FYI program. The CoC holds MOUs with both PHAs and Department of Family and Protective Services (Texas's child welfare agency) to administer FUP/FYI for unhoused youth. HACA and HATC currently hold 214 FUP and FYI vouchers. HACA recently applied to HUD for an additional 75 FYI vouchers. With LifeWorks (lead CoC youth provider), the CoC targets FUP/FYI

vouchers to unhoused youth through CE. LifeWorks provides housing stability case management for 36 months and wraparound service connections, including employment and mental health services. LifeWorks and the CoC also work with the PHAs to help youth convert FUP/FYI to HCVs as a move-on strategy when youth no longer need supportive services but face financial barriers to sustaining housing, a promising practice for ensuring housing stability and reducing returns to homelessness.

**2. CoC's work with Education Providers.** The CoC board maintains one Education/Workforce Development Seat and collaborates with local school districts to coordinate cross-system training and provide Coordinated Entry (CE) and SOAR resource access. LifeWorks maintains active referral and training partnerships with McKinney-Vento Liaisons in Independent School Districts (ISDs) in the CoC, including Austin, Pflugerville, Manor, and Del Valle ISDs to ensure educational access and support for unaccompanied youth and children in youth-headed households. The CoC is working with Austin Community College, which serves significant numbers of unhoused and unstably housed youth, to provide access to HMIS and train staff as Coordinated Assessors.

A specific educational collaboration designed and launched under YHDP is Diversion, an SSO project designed to help youth at risk of or recently experiencing homelessness obtain permanent housing with natural supports. Through Diversion, LifeWorks has trained school staff to identify and refer eligible youth. Although LifeWorks and the CoC elected to replace Diversion with a Permanent Supportive Housing project under the FY23 CoC Program NOFO, LifeWorks will sustain Diversion with alternative funds and maintains active MOUs with Austin, Pflugerville, and Manor ISDs to coordinate services for youth at risk of homelessness.

**3. CoC engagement with Tribes, Tribal organizations, and Indigenous groups.** The federal government and state of Texas do not currently recognize any Tribes or Tribally Designated Housing Entities based in our CoC, but CoC members have elevated that these definitions are limiting and contribute to the continued erasure of Indigenous peoples and organizations in Austin/Travis County. LifeWorks, the lead youth provider in the CoC, is leading the exploration of opportunities to build and repair relationships with the Indigenous Tribes and people in the CoC. This includes incorporating Indigenous practices into programs, such as establishing a community garden at LifeWorks affordable housing complex, which brings youth together to foster community and food sustainability, and building toward a resident-led Tenant's Council that will have sovereignty to make community decisions and address concerns through communal approaches. This also includes understanding what Indigenous groups seek in funding and how these perspectives can be woven into contracts. Due to historically harmful relationships between the government and Indigenous and First Nation communities, CoC policies and grant administration must center Indigenous communities' autonomy to every extent possible to build trust and increase their openness to collaborating with the CoC.

**4. CoC connections to Health Coverage and Services.** The CoC collects health coverage data through self-report when individuals access services. Texas is not a Medicaid Expansion state, but the CoC collaborates with Central Health (Travis County taxpayer funded hospital district) and its CommUnity Care clinics (Federally Qualified Health Center) to access the Medical Access Program (MAP), a county taxpayer-funded insurance discount plan designed to bridge the health access gap for the uninsured community. Unhoused people can access MAP coverage by meeting with a Benefits Specialist at a CommUnity Care clinic, calling Central Health, or applying online.



Service staff at CoC providers are trained in coverage options and provide referrals and/or navigation applying for MAP. The CoC is developing an MOU with Central Health.

Health service utilization is assessed through an MOU with Connexus, a local Health Information Exchange (HIE) that can share health system encounters with people experiencing homelessness who have an ROI. The CoC has also established an HMIS ROI agreement with AshWELL clinic, which provides free/low-cost sexual, reproductive, and LGBTQIA2S+ focused healthcare. Austin Public Health provides free STI testing at rotating community locations, including LifeWorks youth drop-in center, a primary service access point for unhoused youth. The CoC also supports the HOST street outreach team, a multidisciplinary team that brings healthcare directly to unhoused neighbors.

#### **5. CoC's work with Child Welfare, Justice System, and Health Institutions.**

Child Welfare: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) is responsible for coordinating Circle of Care meetings to ensure every youth exiting foster care has a housing plan. LifeWorks, the leading CoC youth provider, is contracted with DFPS to provide transition and financial support services to youth leaving care. It works closely with DFPS to ensure strong integration with the CE system and provide information and support when youth are prioritized for housing from CE. DFPS, ECHO, LifeWorks, and HACA and HATC (local PHAs) collaborate to draw down FUP/FYI vouchers to support unhoused youth who have aged out of foster care and hold quarterly meetings to assess the partnership and identify opportunities for improvement. This strong partnership allows for the rapid deployment of vouchers for former foster youth—since HACA received its most recent batch of FUP vouchers June 1, 2024, 20 have been issued to youth.

Justice System: In the adult justice system, Travis County Jail's Reentry Coordinator is currently undergoing training to become a Coordinated Entry Assessor. The CoC partners with the Indigent

Defense Counsel (composed of Capital Area Private Defender Services, Public Defender Office, and Mental Health Public Defender Office), which employs social workers trained to provide CE. Indigent Defense Counsel works directly with LifeWorks to provide services and reduce harm to incarcerated youth. Indigent Defense Counsel also advocates to navigate youth to the Mental Health docket and secure early release with housing plans to ensure youth are housed at discharge. Members of Indigent Defense Counsel sit on the CoC Board, Leadership Council, and Systems Improvement Committee. ECHO's Systems Advancement Team (which employs a full-time Legal Systems Manager) is currently working to 1) designate Criminal Justice seats on Leadership Council, 2) add Criminal Justice Flags into HMIS, and 3) obtain alternative funding streams to support justice-involved people who do not meet HUD definitions of homelessness.

LifeWorks maintains an active MOU with Travis County Juvenile Probation Department (TCJPD) to provide Diversion services and prevent youth from discharge to homelessness. TCJPD participates in Coordinated Entry and By-Name List staffing sessions. LifeWorks has also developed a pilot partnership with TCJPD to divert youth from juvenile incarceration to receive household-focused supportive services. Texas Juvenile Justice Department has indicated an interest in collaborating with communities to prevent youth discharges to homelessness in response to concerns about conditions in state-run juvenile correctional facilities. If awarded YHDP funds, the CoC will work to engage Texas Juvenile Justice Department in community planning.

Physical and Mental Health Institutions: Formal healthcare partners in the CoC are CommUnity Care, Dell Seton Medical Center, Vivent Health, City of Austin health units, Black Men's Health Clinic, AshWELL Clinic, Travis County Health & Human Services, and Integral Care (Local Mental Health Authority). ECHO has a dedicated position (Healthcare Systems Manager) for engaging health systems and facilitates an Affinity Group through CoC governance to develop and

implement partnerships between homelessness response and healthcare systems, including Coordinated Entry integration. ECHO provides technical assistance to healthcare providers and provides the Housing for Health resource guide to assist with discharge planning for people experiencing homelessness. In addition, ECHO also employs a Legal Systems Manager whose role among other duties is to support the integration of justice involved youth into the work of our CoC Governance and Programming. The Legal Systems Manager works closely with the Juvenile Court System, Travis County Jail, Mental Health Diversion Center Pilot, and is involved in other initiatives to ensure that Youth interacting with those carceral systems have the information and support they need to make every effort to not discharge Youth into homelessness.

## **6. Letter of Support from the PCWA**

See attached letter from Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

### **Youth Collaboration**

See attached communication written by Austin Youth Collective (Austin/Travis County YAB).

### **Data Evaluation & Capacity**

**1. YHDP Program Exits for the Most Recent Year.** The CoC's YHDP projects, Rapid Rehousing (RRH), Diversion, and Permanency through Outreach and Rapid Transitions (PORT, joint TH-RRH) achieved the following exit outcomes in the most recent project year (10/01/22-09/30/23):

- Exited to a positive housing destination: 75% RRH, 49.57% Diversion, 63.87% PORT
- Increased income: 45.95% RRH, 5.19% Diversion, 9.68% PORT
- Had a positive school status: 9.09% RRH, 22.22% Diversion, 8% PORT

**2. CoC's YHDP evaluation & improvement process.** Austin/Travis County's 2017 Coordinated Community Plan identified USICH's Youth Framework and Core Outcomes as guiding principles

for ending youth homelessness. LifeWorks, the lead YHDP provider, developed a quarterly dashboard that reports the following data for each USICH benchmarks for ending youth homelessness: 1) Few youth experience homelessness at any time, (census of sheltered and unsheltered unhoused youth, number of youth newly experiencing homelessness), 2) Unhoused youth are swiftly connected to housing options (number of youth who secured permanent housing, average number of days from identification to permanent housing), and 3) Youth homelessness is non-recurring (number of youth who return to homelessness after securing permanent housing). The CoC also reviews YHDP projects through Quarterly Performance Scorecards and addresses performance issues through technical assistance and Performance Improvement Plans. The initial CCP outlined review and quality improvement roles for Austin Youth Collective (CoC YAB), and AYC initially served on a quality improvement task force monitoring YHDP projects. However, due to provider staffing and AYC administrative changes and engagement challenges related to COVID, task force meetings and AYC participation were not sustained. If awarded additional YHDP funds, the CoC will build on this learning to identify and commit sufficient resources to ensure AYC's full leadership and participation in YHDP monitoring.

**3. Results of most recent YHDP review.** The CoC uses quarterly Performance Scorecards and YHDP dashboards to identify challenges and inform adaptations. Examples include efforts to reduce time from identification to housing, upstream support to prevent homelessness, and program redesign to reduce returns to homelessness. To address time to housing, the CoC has partnered with PHAs to secure more FUP/FYI vouchers for the HRS, advocated for local resources to further scale youth housing programs, and LifeWorks established a youth-focused housing team that partners with landlords and reduces systemic housing barriers (e.g., restrictive screening criteria). To increase prevention efforts, AYC and LifeWorks partnered to fund and launch a Direct

Cash Transfers pilot targeting youth homelessness prevention through flexible financial assistance. They are seeking additional funding through the RHY Prevention Demonstration Program to expand the pilot and engage more community partners. LifeWorks also partnered with the Travis County District Attorney, Juvenile Probation, and Excellence Project, a Black-led grassroots organization, to launch a pilot diverting youth from Juvenile Detention, the number one predictor of youth homelessness in our CoC. This innovative upstream work places our CoC in a strong position to leverage YHDP funding and the community planning process to expand and strengthen robust youth homelessness prevention approaches with system partners and small BIPOC-led organizations that are not yet part of the CoC. To address returns to homelessness, AYC, the CoC, and LifeWorks collectively decided to replace YHDP Diversion with a Permanent Supportive Housing project in the FY23 CoC NOFO, recognizing that the community has no youth-dedicated PSH resources and that existing PSH programs and youth RRH programs don't adequately serve youth with chronic experiences of homelessness and mental health and/or chronic health conditions, contributing to housing losses while in services or after exit. Youth PSH is critically needed to address this gap, and experience in prevention shows a need to focus on services that move further upstream that Diversion could serve under HUD client eligibility criteria.

**4. Impact of YHDP on drastically reducing youth homelessness.** As of the June 2024 YHDP dashboard, the community has permanently housed 1,576 youth system-wide since the launch of YHDP services in October 2018. Of these, 647 (41%) were housed directly through YHDP projects, demonstrating the success of YHDP in spurring additional investments to build and sustain a robust youth homelessness response system. Since implementing YHDP, youth-dedicated permanent housing capacity in the HRS has grown from 23 to 311 beds. Other qualitative achievements include the establishment of a robust youth-specific CE system that covers the entire

CoC and includes strong participation from foster care, adult and juvenile justice, schools, mental health organizations, street outreach teams, PHAs, and CoC partners. Our community has also achieved considerable success securing and operationalizing FUP and FYI vouchers within the HRS. Of 50 new vouchers issued June 1, 2024, 20 are under Housing Assistance Payment contract and the remaining 30 are under application, with all households assigned through CE.

These achievements demonstrate the impact of initial YHDP funding and collaborations in Austin/Travis County. However, significant need remains. As of June 2024, the census of unhoused youth in the CoC is 968, with 894 youth on the CE By-Name List, which far exceeds existing HRS resources for youth. In addition, since October 2018, 35.8% of youth who successfully exited HRS services to permanent housing have returned to homelessness, facing factors such as serious mental health challenges, housing unaffordability, and other cost of living drivers (e.g., childcare). The CoC is strongly positioned to build on learnings from YHDP and existing and emerging collaborations to spur additional system improvements and further expand youth-specific services. The CoC understands the importance of leveraging YHDP to secure non-HUD resources to support an expanded continuum of youth-focused prevention, outreach, shelter, and housing services. Additional YHDP funding will provide Austin/Travis County with much-needed capacity to further expand and elevate youth leadership, increase the number and diversity of youth-focused CoC providers, and build partnerships and secure resources to address key needs and gaps in the current system. These efforts will reduce the number of youth who experience homelessness, reduce the amount of time young people spend unhoused, and ensure that once youth are housed, they have the resources and support needed to avoid ever experiencing homelessness again.

## **Youth Collaboration**

**Austin Youth Collective Overview:** The Austin Youth Collective (AYC) is a group of individuals with lived expertise dedicated to creating social and systemic change related to youth homelessness. Established in 2016, the collective has been devoted to shifting community perspectives on issues such as food insecurity, housing instability, and resource deficiency by using their direct experience and knowledge to influence policies and practices within the Homelessness Response System (HRS). **Structure and Membership:** The AYC is currently composed of five members. We plan to fill all eight member positions by the end of summer 2025. Our new members undergo a 30-day shadow period, in which they observe meetings, complete training, and familiarize themselves with the HRS before actively contributing. We are committed to maintaining diversity within our membership, actively recruiting through peer networks and building a website to increase engagement and outreach. We meet weekly as a team to discuss any requests from ECHO or CoC Board/governance leadership, internal needs and projects, and external commitments. Bi-weekly member-only meetings are held to allow members to connect, build team cohesion, and discuss ideas independently. **Compensation and Payment Structure:** We are compensated at a rate of \$40 per hour, with accommodations for the maximum hours allotted each month based on the relevance of our work. Each member logs their time spent on research, governance meetings, community collaboration, individual projects, and other tasks. Checks and direct deposits are issued 24 hours after payment invoices are submitted on a weekly basis. **Contributions to the Community and Utilizing Our Lived Expertise:** We have played a transformative role in the Austin Continuum of Care (CoC) by leveraging our lived expertise to address system-wide issues and enhance the effectiveness of homeless response initiatives. Our involvement in governance processes has led to the implementation of numerous equitable and

accessibility-focused policies and best practices, which are now followed by organizations, shelters, and other service providers:

- Co-Leading the Austin Winter Response Collective and Inclement Weather Workgroup:

Our members hold leadership positions in these efforts where they develop policy recommendations and best practices for responding to inclement weather, ensuring the safety and well-being of at-risk or unhoused youth during extreme conditions.

- Redesigning the CoC Board: We participated in the redesign of the CoC Board to increase the number of representatives with lived experience to ensure that the voices of those directly impacted by unstable housing are heard and considered in decision-making processes.

- Developing the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT): We directly contributed to the content creation of the Austin Prioritization Assessment Tool (APAT). This also includes extensive APAT data analysis to assist in the relevancy and trauma informed approach of the content.

- Serving on the Independent Review Team (IRT): For several years, our members have served on the IRT, where they review and score applications for HUD funding opportunities to make sure that resources are allocated effectively.

- Partnering with the University of Texas at Austin: Over the past two years, our team has collaborated with research professors to develop a documentary project focused on the experiences of youth facing homelessness. This research will provide the CoC with critical data on underserved youth populations, particularly the hidden population of couch surfers in Austin.

- Creating a Direct Cash Transfer Pilot Program: LifeWorks invited AYC to collaboratively design a new Direct Cash Transfer Pilot Program for youth experiencing housing instability. This program, informed by our research and funded by Point Source Youth, addresses the specific needs



and challenges faced by underrepresented youth. Today, the AYC's lived expertise is continually sought after by organizations wanting to secure federal funds for youth-related projects. Through these efforts, we are actively reshaping the landscape of youth services in Austin. **Challenges and Barriers:** Our members face challenges due to limited working hours, which block our ability to fully engage with the community and participate in decision-making processes. Systemic barriers, such as prioritization and authorization issues within the CoC, also affect our ability to maintain morale and motivation. We are seeking to expand our role beyond providing the "youth stamp of approval" for projects and aim for greater involvement in leadership roles within the CoC. Additionally, we recognize the need for increased support and resources to address the personal and systemic challenges faced by our members. **Needed Projects and Interventions:** We are committed to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by youth experiencing homelessness in the Austin area. Our goals and interventions are designed to create a more inclusive, supportive, and empowering environment for unstably housed young people. Below are the key areas of focus:

1. Community Building- Many young people experiencing homelessness may lack connections to their birth families and often find support through chosen families. AYC aims to reveal the importance of community building and connection, and how these elements impact youth development alongside bridging gaps between the various communities in the Austin area.
2. Financial Education- Our goal is to advocate for financial literacy education, including financial planning and grant assistance. By partnering this education with youth-specific financial assistance we can shift scarcity mindsets and fears associated with money, fostering a healthier relationship with finance and long-term financial independence.
3. Political Education- Understanding and participating in the political process is essential for creating systemic change. We raise awareness about policies and legislation affecting those who

are unstably housed by encouraging community members to stay informed, engage in, and become active participants in local justice and structural systems to ensure laws reflect their needs and rights. 4. New Root Spaces/Facilities- Ensuring that youth have access to spaces where they feel safe and supported is critical for their well-being and development. We have future plans to advocate for the creation of safe spaces where unhoused youth can find refuge, engage in leisure or creative activities, and access immediate support. These spaces could include emergency shelters, transitional housing, drop-in centers, and resource hubs, created to stimulate authentic and transformative growth. **Goals and Expected Outcomes:** Successful outcomes for these projects look like consistent engagement between those receiving services and those providing them. We envision regular meetings where program participants can give honest feedback, suggest changes, and share their current or past experiences. This approach will increase community engagement, awareness, and the ability to adapt programs to better serve those in need. To ensure youth's mental and emotional health are protected, improvements in the transitioning experience for youth moving from housing programs to stable housing can be made through providing youth-directed or peer-led therapy and counseling. Broadening the definition of youth homelessness to include those experiencing instability through couch surfing or living out of a car will increase access to services for at-risk youth, providing prevention support before housing instability becomes a crisis. We aim to prevent youth from experiencing the worst-case scenarios of unstable housing and support them in achieving long-term stability and success.

**Healthy Youth Collaboration:** Effective collaboration with youth requires genuine partnership where youth voices are respected. This should include the following principles: 1. Active Listening and Validation: Adults in the space must practice active listening, with intent to understand the youth's individualized perspectives. Validating these experiences and how they impact interaction

with the world should be balanced by an understanding that they are gaining knowledge and perspectives on how to operate in society. 2. Meaningful Engagement: Authentic engagement consists of genuine interest, curiosity when interacting with another individual, trauma informed approaches surrounding delicate ideas, and further inquiry about possible improvements. All these ways can foster deeper connections within a team, increasing positive engagement. 3. Empowerment and Final Decision-Making: Youth should be directly involved in formulating strategies and guidelines that pertain to them, and their opinions should be heard and implemented. Youth must have the final say on matters that directly affect them. This is crucial to creating outcomes that reflect their needs and priorities, rather than being shaped solely by external authorities. 4. Ongoing Support and Collaboration: Youth should have access to continuous support, both from peers and from adults in leadership roles. This support helps to foster confidence and ensures that youth can actively participate in the progression and completion of projects. This means actively seeking the guidance of youth employees and ensuring that their input shapes the direction of initiatives. This kind of collaboration transcends mere consultation; it's an organizational effort where youth voices are valued at the forefront of decision-making.

**Conclusion:** When youth are genuinely included in the decision-making process, it enhances the effectiveness of the work being done and ensures that outcomes are equitable and relevant to those most affected. Our members have made a significant impact on the community, and with additional funding, we aim to further expand our reach and influence.

We hope to foster an authentic model of collaboration across all organizations that work with youth. By addressing the barriers youth currently face and implementing new initiatives, we will continue to be a driving force for positive change in the lives of youth experiencing unstable housing in Austin.