Safe Harbors:
Creating Safe and Supportive Housing for Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents
Parenting is tough! Young parents approach the difficult task of parenting with added challenges – school, financial strain, and social stigma. For a shocking number of young parents, housing instability and homelessness add to the hardship.

*Safe Harbors: Creating Safe and Supportive Housing for Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents* reflects the experiences of more than 250 North Carolina teen parents. Their experiences were recorded through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews, and provide a window into the real experiences of young families in our state. Their stories are corroborated through a limited-scale needs assessment and key informant interviews with adults who work to provide housing and support to pregnant and parenting teens.
What is homelessness?

In 1987 and then again in 2002, Congress authorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, setting the primary federal legislation dealing with homeless children and youth, especially addressing their educational rights.

While there are many definitions of homelessness, we selected the McKinney Vento Act definition as the most applicable one for assessing the experiences and needs of pregnant and parenting teens because of its consideration of young people’s developmental stage.

According to McKinney-Vento Act, a young person is homeless if they:

- Lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including:
  - Shared housing, living in motels, hotels, camp grounds
  - Living in emergency or transitional shelters
  - Are abandoned in hospitals
  - Are awaiting foster care placement
  - Primary nighttime residence that is a private or public place not designed for use as regular sleeping accommodations
  - Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, etc.

In the United States...

1.6 Million teens are homeless

10% of homeless teens are pregnant

Risk factors for becoming homeless:

- Lack of supportive and functional family
- Adolescent pregnancy
- Physical or sexual abuse and trauma
- Mental illness (youth or parent)
- History of being in state custody
- Substance abuse
- Financial pressures
- Housing instability

“Teens don’t recognize it as homelessness if they are going from friend’s house to friend’s house.”
There are so many more calls for service than we can meet. We get 10 times more referrals than we can accept.

Through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, we asked more than 250 participants in North Carolina’s state-funded Adolescent Parenting Program to talk about their living situations over the previous year. Here's what they said:

- 15% indicated two or more recent residences
- 7% indicated three or more recent residences
- 44% listed past residences other than with their parents
- 21% were exposed to drugs or violence during pregnancy

Half wanted to live somewhere else. Why?

- FAMILY TENSION (45.6%) “You lose trust and they say ’you wanna go have a baby, you do it on your own.’”
- OVERCROWDING (35.9%) “There’s a lot going on in the house and there’s a risk of being evicted.”
- DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENCE (30.1%) “I get tired of parents nagging about certain stuff — for example telling me how to raise a child.”
- FEAR (19.4%) “I want my child to be safe.”

In North Carolina...


Where can teens go?

- MATERNITY HOMES — Only available during pregnancy
- HOMES FOR TEEN PARENTS — For pregnant & parenting girls
- TRANSITIONAL LIVING PROGRAMS Youth, some may be pregnant
- FOSTER CARE — Limited options for mother & baby to stay together
- DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS — Temporary, serves ages 18+
- OTHER — Family Care Homes, Substance Abuse Facilities

Why are options so limited?

- Too few shelters offer space for teen moms and babies
- Stigma against pregnant and parenting teens
- Inadequate community resources to support pregnant and parenting teens
- Staff capacity can’t meet demand for services
- Restrictive state policies for establishing new maternity homes
- Few federal grant programs fund housing for pregnant/parenting teens.
- State Maternity Fund is inadequate and hard to access.
“It would be easier to stay in my current living environment versus the facility because of too many rules... Like, my boyfriend couldn’t pick my child up to take his own daughter to daycare.”

Core Components of Supportive Housing

Through their joint project, *Bricks, Mortar, and Community: The Foundations of Supportive Housing for Pregnant and Parenting Teens*, Healthy Teen Network and Child Trends established five key core components of supportive environments for pregnant and parenting teens.

**SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE SELF-SUFFICIENCY** — Help youth to develop basic self-sufficiency skills, so that s/he will be able to transition to independent living, accessing resources and services as needed without the assistance of a case manager.

**SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE HOUSING STABILITY** — Facilitate attainment of affordable housing in a safe neighborhood, and continued housing stability and independent living upon completion of the program.

**SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE FINANCIAL STABILITY** — Help youth to work toward financial stability by facilitating educational attainment and employment at a livable wage, as well as financial literacy.

**SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE SUCCESSFUL AND ENGAGED PARENTING AND ATTACHMENT** — Facilitate successful and engaged parenting skills, fostering attachment between parent(s) and child.

**SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS** — Cultivate a sense of self-worth and right to healthy relationships with partners, peers, family, and the community, as well as the skills to resolve conflict, solve problems, and negotiate.

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**Barriers to Staying at Home**

- Family poverty
- Unsafe living conditions
- Stigma toward pregnant/parenting teens
- Family conflict caused by:
  - Inadequate family support
  - Overcrowding
  - Interpersonal violence
- Increased desire for independence

**Barriers to Better Housing**

- Maternal age requirements for shelters
- Landlords won’t rent to those under 18
- Hesitation about leaving their home community if housing is in another town
- Foster care system limits options for teen mom & child to stay together
- Lack of employment/income
- High cost of independent living
- Lack of transportation
- Immigration status
- Lack of affordable childcare

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Young people aren’t the only ones who face housing obstacles; professionals who serve pregnant and parenting teens often run into systems-level barriers to creating and providing safe and supportive housing options. Key informant interviews with these professionals surfaced common challenges they face when trying to address their teen clients’ housing needs.

THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN STRETCHED THE ENTIRE SAFETY NET – “DSS Child Protective Services prioritizes younger children where services are mandated. The shortage of foster care homes leaves older youth less likely to receive these services.”

STRICT STATE REGULATIONS MAKE IT HARD TO ESTABLISH NEW MATERNITY HOMES — “Right now, unless you’re accredited through one of three organizations, you can’t open up a mother-baby program or a maternity home.”

MORE PROFESSIONALS NEED SPECIAL TRAINING TO WORK WITH PREGNANT & PARENTING TEENS – Professionals need special skills to address pregnant and parenting teens’ multiple needs, such as the need for trauma-informed care. “Having the right staff, well-trained staff with the appropriate approach, makes a world of difference.”

STIGMA AGAINST PREGNANT AND PARENTING TEENS – Stigma is a barrier at political, community, and individual levels. “They are trying to survive in a world that’s kind of not accepting them and that’s not ready…”

LACK OF HOUSING OPTIONS NEAR A TEEN’S HOME COMMUNITY – With so few homes specifically for pregnant and parenting teens, many teens would have to leave current support systems to access the most effective programs. “It is very tough to leave everything you know and all your support systems and move somewhere very far away.”

FAMILIES FACE MORE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES IN GENERAL – “Poverty is a big issue. With the way the economy has been the past few years, many families are suffering and living in crowded and unsafe living conditions.”

HOUSING ASSISTANCE IS IN SHORT SUPPLY – “Many families are losing their homes due to the bad economy. Many of these families had access to TANF and low-income housing. Now, this type of assistance is extremely limited or does not exist.”

“Why are there so few supportive housing options in North Carolina?”

“You would think that when you’re talking about homeless moms and babies that the money would be flowing in...”

... That is not the case.”
What’s working in North Carolina?

Through their key informant interviews, professionals who work with pregnant and parenting teens also had the chance to talk about what is working really well.

PROGRAMS THAT BUILD, STRENGTHEN, AND MAINTAIN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS – “We work with young women on mending family relationships, if there is an appropriate family involved.”

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE MATERNITY HOMES – When maternity home staff understand adolescent development, they can create rules and structures that honor teens’ natural need for independence.

WRAP-AROUND SERVICES – By serving as a hub for care, effective housing programs also coordinate the educational, financial, and personal needs that often are the source of breaks in teens’ safety net.

PROGRAMS THAT VIEW AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE AS PRIMARY GOALS – Programs support self-sufficiency instead of taking a punitive response to teen pregnancy and parenthood. “We ask them about their preferences and then work with them to bring about positive changes.”

PROGRAMS THAT OFFER BROAD SKILLS-BUILDING – Programs help teens build multiple skill sets around parenting, education, and employment.

PROGRAMS THAT MEET BROAD NEEDS – Programs help meet pregnant and parenting teens’ full needs, including child care, transportation, and health care needs.

Policy Recommendations for North Carolina

IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION IN NORTH CAROLINA
- Create a statewide assessment form for providers to collect data on pregnant and parenting teens (including homelessness status)
- Use data to document need, identify funding sources, and advocate for supportive policies

DEVELOP A STATEWIDE ADVOCACY NETWORK
- Develop statewide providers’ network to foster collaboration & information-sharing among providers working with this population
- Expand group of stakeholders to include advocates, pregnant and parenting teens, and policy-makers
- Convene a housing forum to educate providers and advocates and to develop strategies to expand housing options
- Engage young parents as advocates

EXPLORE ALTERNATIVE HOUSING MODELS
- Reevaluate traditional group home models and explore other models for independent living (e.g. host homes)
- Collaborate with existing systems of care (foster care, domestic violence shelters) to improve current programs and incorporate innovative models

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS
- Modify State Maternity Home rules to enable development of new homes
- Increase funding for the State Maternity Home Fund
- Improve understanding of existing policies and funding for residential housing for pregnant & parenting adolescents
- Locate human services, schools, recreation, and transportation near shelters/homes

“Long-term interventions are almost 100% effective... but we have to have patience to see the results.”
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Download the full needs assessment and report online!

Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign of North Carolina

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