

Wraparound with Street-Involved Young Homeless Parents A YPNFA Position Paper

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May 2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This position paper has been written to demonstrate the impact of using a wraparound process with street-involved young homeless parents. While the wraparound process has been effectively used in Ontario for the past 10 years with families with complex needs, it is only in the past 5 years that it has been actively used with young homeless parents. Since 1999, Wraparound¹, housed at Oolagen Community Services, has offered the wraparound process to 173 young mothers in Toronto with 127 (73%) of these mothers having used the process in the past three years.

The involvement of Wraparound with young homeless parents has been facilitated by the Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) network which began its roots at Toronto Public Health in 1997. The impetus for this network was generated during the Baby Jordan Heikamp inquest into the starvation death of a 5-week old baby of a young homeless mom in Toronto. At the same time, in a report for the Toronto's Department of Public Health, Bernstein & Lee (1998) indicated that shelter users aged 15-24 years were on the rise to 22%, 50% of street-involved youth were young women, and 300 births annually were estimated in this population.

In order to address the urgent need to cement supports for young homeless parents YPNFA created responses based on the knowledge and experience of agencies and institutions who worked with homeless pregnant youth. The network established itself as a strong unified entity and collaborated in writing joint proposals and sharing responsibilities to develop a high level of credibility in the community serving homeless youth. As one of its several community initiatives, YPNFA formalized its partnership with Wraparound in June 2002 in an attempt to involve its members to engage young homeless parents in the wraparound process.

This paper provides the findings of a qualitative study with parents and service providers who were involved in a wraparound process under the YPNFA/Wraparound partnership. A total of 8 parents and 13 service professionals participated by way of focus groups or face-to-face interviews to discuss their experience of the wraparound process. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to understand the challenges experienced by young homeless families, the service history and sources of help available to young parents, wraparound as an intervention process for this population, and the outcomes that were achieved while participating in the wraparound process.

The findings indicate key process ingredients experienced by the participants in the study, such as, privileging the voice of the parent, a self-driven process of goal setting and planning, a service that is individualized, a holistic perspective of needs, a flexible approach, a focus on the strengths of the parent, and leveraging a supportive environment. In addition, involvement in the wraparound process leads to improved service coordination, increased access to community resources (e.g. housing), linkage with therapeutic programs, and reconnection with social and family networks. The participants in the study voice some limitations (e.g. motivation of community) to implementing the wraparound process and discuss the sustainability of goals

¹ The Wraparound Program at Oolagen Community Services helps youth and family in crisis to identify and utilize a highly individualized network of support (families, friends, community and professionals) (Oolagen Community Services, 2006). The term "Wraparound" in this paper refers to the program offered at Oolagen.

achieved in wraparound. The author offers several recommendations to strengthen the wraparound process with street-involved young homeless parents.

INTRODUCTION

Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) is an interagency network convened in 1997 by Toronto Public Health to develop comprehensive and coordinated responses for homeless, street-involved youth who are pregnant and/or parenting. Since that time YPNFA has highlighted the complexity of service needs for this population through a campaign of advocacy, education and partnership building with several youth serving agencies in Toronto.

In June 2002, YPNFA formalized their partnership with Wraparound in order to strengthen the community response to the needs of young homeless parents. This action commenced the use of the wraparound process to wrap health, social and housing services around young homeless parents in Toronto. It was envisioned that this would stabilize and assist young homeless parents during their prenatal, childbirth, postpartum and parenting periods using a non-deficit, strengths based, self-driven, and coordinated perspective of support. Further, it was felt that participation in the wraparound process would acknowledge the resiliency of young homeless parents and enable them to develop a life plan inclusive of their needs and salient to their life histories of abuse, placements, labeling of 'behavioral disorders' and stigma in society.

The wraparound process is a way to improve the lives of children and families who have complex needs. It is not a program or type of service but a process used to help communities develop individualized plans of care (Wraparound Training Manual, 2005). The plan is developed by the Child and Family Team of four to ten people who know the child best including the child, family, informal members and service professionals who make up less than 50% of the Team. Within the wraparound process families, with the assistance of their teams, identify goals in various life domains (e.g. housing, social, etc.) determine priorities, and develop strategies that are matched with their strengths. As well, families are encouraged to link with their kinship and community networks to implement individualized plans (Brown & Debicki, 2000).

The wraparound process in Ontario is governed by 11 key principles and critical elements: community ownership; community based; individualized plans; strength-based; access, voice and ownership of the individual; collaboration with formal and informal systems; use of informal resources or community supports; access to flexible funding; unconditional support; measurable outcomes; and inclusive of all community stakeholders. For a more extensive description of these principles and elements see Debicki et al. (1998).

The purpose of this document is to outline the position of YPNFA with respect to the wraparound process as a medium of support for street-involved young homeless parents. In the absence of empirical data regarding the impact of this intervention with this population, YPNFA commissioned a qualitative research study in 2005 to understand how the young parents served by Wraparound at Oolagen Community Services had experienced the wraparound process. The findings of this study indicate that involvement in the wraparound process leads to improved outcomes in access and use of community services and resources. Further, the findings show

that the individualized, holistic, and empowering process enables the parent to build social connections and pursue sustainability of a normal life in the community. The recommendations from the study will, if implemented, lead to a more significantly positive outcome for street-involved young homeless parents participating in a wraparound process.

Literature Review

It is critical to build on the demonstrated success of the wraparound process as the participants in the above-mentioned study confirm the risks that many homeless youth face including substance abuse (see Smart, Adlaf, Walsh, & Zdanowicz, 1994; Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, & Cohen, 1988) physical and mental health issues (see Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004; Ensign, 1998; Unger et al., 1998) and past child abuse and neglect (see Craig & Hodson, 1998; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005).

In addition, a literature review suggests that mental health problems identified by homeless youth may in fact be associated more with poverty than with homelessness (Buckner and Bassuk, 1997; McCaskill, Toro, & Wolfe, 1998). Poverty is also implicated in studies on parent-child relationships. Empirical evidence suggests that mothers who are living in poverty tend to be less responsive to their children than non-poor mothers (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1992; McLoyd & Wilson, 1992). As well, in a study with 88 single Black mothers who were employed and non-employed and who were also current and former welfare recipients in New York City, Jackson (2000) found that behavior problems in children were associated with parent unemployment.

Relating to family income, in a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the wraparound process in Ontario, Brown and Loughlin (2002) found that families with low income were more likely to perceive a positive impact from involvement in a wraparound process. This process addressed the shortage of basic needs in families and provided unconditional support to isolated parents (e.g. single parents). The authors stated that a wraparound process could increase the self-esteem and social inclusion of single parent families on low income (Brown & Loughlin, 2002).

The literature review does identify lower self-efficacy, less social support, and parental stress as contributing factors of parent-child relationships (Jackson, 2000). It is evident that the level of control a mother can exercise over her life challenges affects her level of stress. Studies show that self-efficacy² buffers the effect of problem behaviors in children on the mothers' parenting (Bandura, 1977; 1989; 1997). Bandura further contends that persons with high self-efficacy generate more optimism, effort, and resilience when faced with life struggles and are also more likely to seek support from family and friends.

Seeking support from family and friends depends on the availability of a positive social network. Some studies indicate that homeless youth have very small social networks usually comprising of a homogeneous population of deviant peers who provide membership in a system of emotional support (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). A similar finding is reported by Van der Ploeg, Gaemers, and Hoogendam (1991) who found that 50% of the youth in their study had

² Jackson, (2000, p.3) defines 'self-efficacy' as "a belief in one's personal mastery over difficult circumstances."

between one to three friends and over 50% had no contact with their biological parents. Even though some youth in the study did have friends, 80% reported that they did not have “real” friends.

In contrast, Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt (2005) found that social networks of 428 homeless youth and runaway adolescents were heterogeneous involving relationships carried over from their home environments and new ones built on the street. Almost 80% of the youth mentioned relationships that they had formed prior to street living including friends from home (66.4%). Also, a substantial number of youth mentioned family members (30.6%) as part of their overall social network. This finding challenges the belief that homeless youth are cut off from supportive family ties as a substantial number of youth in this study said that they received instrumental support from a parent (31.5%) or relative (48.4%). As well 70.1% reported receiving emotional support from a parent or relative (Johnson et al., 2005). While this study did not focus on the quality of relationships between the youth and their kinship, it is apparent that a significant number of them viewed their families and relatives as a source of support.

In addition to poverty, parenting stress, lower self-efficacy and less social support, disrupted family systems also lead to poor parent-child relationships and dysfunctional behaviors evoking the involvement of Child Protection Services (CPS)³. It is reported that between 50% - 75% of street youth have had contact with CPS (Kennedy, 1991; Powers, Eckenrode, & Jaklitsch, 1990; Shane, 1991). Youth who come in contact with CPS are usually identified as having behavioral problems that become the focus of treatment as opposed to the victimization experienced from family violence (Doueck, Ishisaka, Sweany, & Gilchrist, 1987; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Powers et al., 1990).

This finding is reflected in a Canadian study with 160 youth involved with CPS where 73% - 83% of the participants were victims of physical violence and 82% - 94% were victims of psychological violence. However, in only 16% of these cases, the reason for involvement with CPS was stated as physical or emotional abuse (McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Carnochan, 1995). As well, Robert et al. (2005) found that only 11% of the homeless youth were under CPS supervision because of parental behavior even though 62% reported that they had experienced violence from their parents.

Early involvement with CPS seems to be related to the frequency of use of shelters by homeless youth. A study with 11,401 young sheltered homeless adults examined the relationship between involvement with CPS and shelter use. It was found that 29% of the participants had been involved with CPS as children, 74% of whom had been placed in care (Jung Min Park, Metraux, & Culhane, 2005). In addition, involvement with CPS increased the likelihood of repeated shelter living among these children in adulthood underscoring the need for housing services for young homeless persons with a history of CPS involvement.

³ In Ontario, Canada, Child Protection Services (CPS) are delivered by the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), an incorporated not-for-profit agency governed by a volunteer board of directors and funded by the Province of Ontario. The legal mandate of the CAS is to protect children from harm by implementing prevention and crisis responses to offset child abuse and neglect. A range of services including assessments, family support, and placements of children at risk are offered (CAS Toronto, 2001).

In contrast, Hyde (2005) reported the resistance of homeless youth to use traditional services, such as, shelters. Fifty homeless youth in Los Angeles who spoke about their life histories and their understanding of homelessness highlighted their resilience to becoming self-supporting at a very young age (Hyde, 2005). In order to effect their own decisions about daily living and protect their independent status, youth were reluctant to use traditional services that seemingly jeopardized their lifestyle. Resistance to service was further heightened when homeless youth were confronted with deficit-based services focusing on their psychological and mental health problems. This focus conflicted with the fact that they had escaped from traumatizing situations and needed services that protected them from further trauma (Hyde, 2005).

As well, some youth remained skeptical of services that aimed at helping them to succeed in mainstream society given their limits in education and employment (Hyde, 2005). This indicates that homeless youth are more concerned about their own issues of vulnerability and disappointment than the problem issues identified by service professionals. Therefore, life on the street seems to be a positive and rational strategy implicating an increased likelihood of “hidden homelessness” among youth who do not use public services or shelter systems (Robert et al., 2005).

However, life on the street becomes problematic when a young woman becomes a parent rendering her in the care of service organizations in the community. The literature on the effectiveness of services for families indicates some models of success. Brown and Loughlin (2002) who tracked 362 families (217 receiving wraparound and 145 receiving traditional services) over nine months and in eight communities in Ontario reported a higher satisfaction rate and improved goal achievement with the wraparound process compared to traditional services.

As well, Collins, Lemon, and Street (2000) conducted 199 interviews with teen parents, 72 who were living in a residential program for welfare recipients and 127 with those who had left the program. The authors found that the participants in the study were more satisfied with programs and services that incorporated a childcare and school/GED component and less satisfied with supports received for life skills, housing and employment assistance.

Young parents were motivated to catch up with their education interrupted by lack of childcare and family struggles. They were cognizant of the fact that higher income in families is related to maternal education (Harris, 1996). In addition, Wiklund (1993) found 10 motivators for young parents attending education programs: "self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy development, community/church involvement, job advancement, launching, economic need, educational advancement, and urging of others" (p. 28). Further, Rivera (2003) found that having children was the primary factor prompting a majority of homeless parents in shelter living to participate in education programs.

In addition, the matching of the educational curriculum relevant to young homeless parents was cited in the Rivera (2003) study. The author described the success of using popular education with fifty homeless and formerly homeless mothers who participated in an adult literacy program at their shelters. Popular education was used to strengthen reading and

numeracy skills incorporated in related topics of motherhood, parenting, and social inequality experienced by young homeless parents.

Given the complexity of service provision to address the multiple needs of young homeless parents as identified in the literature, the qualitative research study described below shows the potential of addressing these needs using a wraparound process. The findings of the study focus on the experience of wraparound as a process as well as the achievements for young homeless parents who use this intervention.

RESEARCH STUDY

The YPNFA study on wraparound with street-involved young homeless⁴ parents used a qualitative approach to understand the felt experiences of this population and the ways in which wraparound had impacted their well-being. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) was used to elicit discussion from parents and service providers on:

- the challenges experienced by young homeless families;
- the service history and sources of help available to young parents;
- wraparound as an intervention process; and
- achievements in wraparound.

The participants were encouraged to discuss how the wraparound process fared as a general helping mechanism to address the unique challenges presented by young homeless parents.

A total of 21 participants consented to provide their feedback through either a face-to-face interview or a focus group. The researcher conducted three focus groups - one with 3 wraparound facilitators and two attended by a total of 7 service providers involved in needs assessment, programming, partnership building, proposal writing, and informal (non-professional) or formal (professional) team membership. As well, 11 participants comprising of 8 parents and 3 service providers opted to participate in a face-to-face interview.

Profile of Parents in the Study

Eight of the total participants were consumers or parents who had directly used the wraparound process during the period 2000 to 2005. Six of these parents had graduated from wraparound for at least 6 months and 2 were in the process at the time of the study. One graduated parent was now working as a part-time wraparound facilitator.

All the parents who participated in this study were female, single or separated/divorced from their partners. All but one were under 30 yrs old. They had between 1 and 5 children ranging in ages from 3 months to 13 years old. Two parents had some high school education and the rest had completed a high school diploma. Three parents had taken some college level

⁴ A 'homeless' parent in this study was defined as someone who did not have stable housing, could not afford to sustain housing, was forced to move several times, was staying in temporary accommodations with a friend or a shelter and had fallen into a transient lifestyle.

courses. All the parents were unemployed and had a family income of less than \$19,000 per annum.

Profile of Service Professionals in the Study

Thirteen service professionals provided their input on the wraparound process with young homeless parents. They identified themselves as wraparound facilitators, community health officers, social workers, public health nurses, program supervisors, office clerks, and addiction therapists.

Their collective agencies engaged with about 35 social service and community organizations in Toronto including, government ministries, funding agencies, public health services, mental health agencies, addictions services, school systems, child protection services, shelter systems, maternity homes, social assistance programs, daycare services, vocational services, youth services, child and family service agencies, housing services, community associations, food banks, and private enterprise.

Referrals

Service professionals in the community who had come in contact with homeless parents made the majority of the referrals to Wraparound. These professionals worked in the areas of health, child welfare, shelter, and family service agencies. Two parents had referred themselves to Wraparound through connection with a wraparound facilitator and having used the process before.

The majority of the referrals to Wraparound were made to avoid the separation of children and parents at CPS intervention: “when she became pregnant again she was determined that this baby was not going to be taken away from her.” Parents used this service to help advocate for the return of their children: “He was with CAS for six months...that’s when I got [name] fully involved to help me to try and get him back.” Almost as many participants discussed the support they were seeking to deal with specific barriers that were prompting the separation of children from their parents. One parent said, “I knew where I wanted to go...but I didn’t really know what steps I needed to take to get there.”

Length of Involvement

The participants indicated a range of answers about the length of involvement in the wraparound process. Parents currently using the process had been in wraparound from 2 months to 8 months and graduated parents had used the process for up to a year. For those who were repeating the process, it felt like they had never left wraparound even though there had been an interruption. This may be reflected in the fact that the process is always ended with an invitation to return: “...sometimes they [parents] disappear for three months and then they will come back and they will say, ‘Remember, you said that I can come back’.” This belief is sustained with an informal closure of the wraparound process as stated by a graduated parent: “if there is a file there, the file is not closed yet as we haven’t signed any discharge paper.”

FINDINGS

Key Process Ingredients

As parents got involved in the wraparound process, 7 major process ingredients became apparent to the participants in the study: 1) privileging the voice of the parent; 2) a self-driven process of goal setting and planning; 3) a service that is individualized; 4) incorporating a holistic perspective of needs; 5) applying a flexible approach; 6) focusing on the strengths of the parent; and 7) leveraging a supportive environment.

Voice of the Parent

Privileging the voice of the parent in the process was an essential ingredient to wraparound. It allowed the parent to be part of the decision making: “giving them that opportunity to agree or not” and allowed the individual to bring to the table issues other than those identified by their formal and informal systems: “I’m the one being heard, not everybody else, it’s me being heard.” The parents felt “the power of an audience” when “giving voice to their strengths and making them real again.” Having the forum to project their voice to an audience served as a motivator through the process to keep pushing forward the work of the team. The parent could exercise choice on who would be on their team “you pick your own support” and wraparound facilitator as “[they can] fire the facilitator so they don’t have to have that person if they are not working for them.” Using their voice then meant that the parents were taking ownership of the process and its outcome.

Self-driven Process

As well as taking ownership, the participants stated that the parents “drive” and “guide” the process. In so doing they consider the things in their lives that they want to work on: “I picked up about schooling...I picked about going back to work, I picked about legal status, I spoke about safety.” This self-reflection is an empowering opportunity to exercise self-agency as “their lives have very much been mediated and driven by other social services...and they have not had that opportunity to look at their lives and say this is how I see things going and this is where I need them to move or change.” A wraparound facilitator engaged the parents to identify their needs: “the first meeting we had was to go over my life domain area...like what I needed help with” and set up individual teams. Parents met with their teams on a monthly basis to develop plans “I had to put different plans together for my family...I want to go back to school...certain things we were going to do for [son]”, and seek assistance with implementing goals “help me to get different resources outside.” Over time, the parents were able to see the progress made in the planning and were further motivated by the “many things that have been achieved.”

Individualized Service

A key factor of success mentioned by the participants was the effort made to “fit the services to that young mom as opposed to young moms to services.” As a result, the outcome for each parent was individualized to the needs they had identified in the process. This required the wraparound team to go along with the parents and be “willing to work with them on what they identify as being the main issues.” The process was “custom fit” to take into account their cultural norms and lifestyles. As a service professional said:

...it's just the respect for people's values, norms and beliefs that makes us strongly different and the key thing is working with them [parents]...where they are at, because a lot of times these moms have hit rock bottom.

Working with the parents "at their level" was facilitated by using an informal and non-professional approach that connected with the parents at "a human level as opposed to worker/client [level]." Such an approach took on "a different feel" for the parent as meetings could happen in their homes, "food is involved and informal language is used." In addition, remaining sensitive to individual cultural norms required acknowledging when a decision made in wraparound had not worked: "admitting that something isn't right, let's go back and take a look at it again...[what] could be more helpful."

Holistic Perspective

In order to custom fit the wraparound process to the individual, the planning in the team considered the stressors in the parent's individual, family, and community systems: "we look at the situation from a systemic point of view with the family so it not just one area of dealing with counseling." Incorporating a holistic perspective necessitates the engagement of "others" be it significant persons in the family system or service professionals, such as, child protection workers. The work within the process then requires handling conflicting perspectives from these systems while maintaining the focus on the needs of the mother. As a parent said:

...with your boyfriend or partner involved, I experienced that...suddenly wraparound becomes focused on him...obviously directing the family as a whole [and] he tends to get into the role, 'Here are my needs and I want to be heard too'...and there is conflict with what the moms are trying to say.

However, the benefit of a holistic and family focused approach was recognized by this service professional who said that enabling the parent in wraparound helps the whole family:

...being able to ask for diapers, being able to ask for subsidized day care, being able to ask for a respite program...the package and wraparound planning happens around that family unit.

Flexible Approach

A flexible approach in wraparound was used to sustain the integrity of an individually tailored service from a holistic perspective. This meant that there was no set time limit assigned to an individual referred to Wraparound. The process was geared to the individual's pace understanding that "it may take two steps forward and two steps back again." Regardless of the pace, the process continued for as long as the individual wanted to push toward accomplishing goals recognizing that sometimes they needed to have a break and "they don't have to come back and go on the wait list."

In addition, flexibility was woven into "when the meetings are held, where the meetings are held and how frequently the meetings are held." As well the parent could choose to work on one to several goals and shift their focus at any time in the process "if something else happens."

Focus on Strengths

The identification of individual strengths early on in the process served to “replenish hope” in what seemed “a helpless situation.” This exercise lifted out the positives and created a significant shift for the service professionals involved with the homeless parents because their network focused on the negatives: “in the past we all thought that we were going to help the needy.” For the parents themselves, a talk about their strengths showed them “that you could do it... this is your strength and let’s work on it.” It boosted them up as this parent described:

...when you see that list up there you say, ‘Wow!’ That’s really neat, because you don’t think of the positive things about yourself...unless you had that fortunate [experience] growing up... Identifying those strengths gives you a different outlook as an individual, what your capabilities are - and knowing those strengths are there, it gives you the extra boost, drive, to take it further...because that’s the foundation on which all the goals and aspirations are set.

Leveraging a Supportive Environment

Once the parent and wraparound facilitator had laid the foundation for a strengths-based, culturally fit, individualized, and self-directed process, the remainder of the time in wraparound focused on building in supports and coping skills to move the parent toward a changed environment. The ultimate aim was to turn over goals and empower the parents to the point that “we can step back and let them [parents] use their own resources and supports that they have already built through the process.” Leveraging the support for the parent in wraparound involved building a team and a network of support around the parent.

Building a team. A critical part of the supportive environment was the team of informal and formal members who stayed the journey with the parent. While the parents were attached to some professional service in the community, they often could not identify positive people from their informal network. Struggles with birth/adopted families in childhood coupled with a lifestyle of street involvement and homelessness had severed links with kinship. Further, current friends were engaged in lifestyles that did not match the new life that the parents in wraparound were trying to achieve: “they are [] off at you because you can’t go out to club with them on Friday and hang out because you have [parental] responsibilities and they don’t...so if you have one of them on the team I don’t know how that will be of benefit.”

As a result, often the parents had very small teams with more formals (such as, shelter worker, addictions therapist, Children’s Aid worker, social worker, youth worker, nurse, probation officer, therapist, counselor) than people from an informal network. Therefore, the work of the wraparound team was to look at ways of enlarging the team: “We looked at ways of finding informals differently, so old shelter workers [or] present shelter workers became informals.” An informal then was a person who the parent had a built relationship with and trusted as a friend. In some cases a volunteer was introduced to the parent as a potential friend and mentor on the team. A few parents had the support of kinship – mother, grandmother, aunt, boyfriend, and brother.

Network of support. The team brought at the parents’ disposal “a network of support” and a commitment by team members to offer their expertise in brainstorming ideas, navigating

systems, locating resources, and developing coping skills. Team member activities took a variety of forms: writing letters, making phone calls, teaching budgeting skills, helping to get a babysitter, providing food vouchers and TTC tickets, accompanying to appointments, finding a shelter or housing, connecting with a priest, researching resources in the community, advocating for child custody/visitation, filling forms, moving, helping in a crisis, etc.

Further, informal team members were able to offer friendship “so you invite them out...to go to the park...to go to the movies with you” and trust, “because I am not a professional they may feel more comfortable...not having to prove themselves” or “having a fear that something will happen because it will be reported.” This element of trust with an informal on the team helped to offset a predominant professional view for one parent: “I had a really wonderful lady that was on my team, thank God for her! Because she believed in me and she said she knew that I didn’t steal the stuff.” As such, the integrity of the process was sustained by the “honesty” and “accountability” generated in working as a team. A service professional said that there are no “hidden conversations...everything is out on the table”, and:

...things get actually done because we all meet on a regular basis so we all have our responsibility to assist moms with certain things, so we know that we need to do certain things to get them accomplished for the next meeting...so there is more of an accountability.

Achievements for Young Homeless Parents in Wraparound

In addition to experiencing the unique process of wraparound, the participants in the study identified four thematic areas of achievement: 1) improved service coordination; 2) increased access to community resources; 3) linkages with therapeutic programs; and 4) reconnections with the family and community networks.

Service Coordination

Improved service coordination had been the primary aim of YPNFA when creating a network of partners including Wraparound. This objective was realized through both the YPNFA partnership and the use of the wraparound process.

YPNFA partnership. This partnership began with the knowledge that there was a system of about twenty community agencies in place that could develop joint programs through a more coordinated approach. Service professionals in the study represented many of these agencies and had participated in YPNFA activities as well as sat on wraparound teams. In their discussions on partnering with the YPNFA network they indicated that it took a considerable length of time for partner agencies to develop trust, bridge their methods of intervention and accept that they could “accomplish a lot more when working together.” As well, there was skepticism about using a wraparound process with street-involved youth.

However, at the time of the study, the service professionals indicated that a very successful partnership had been forged: “I think we are like a virtual team.” Success factors that had solidified the partnership between agency providers and Wraparound included good communication through regular meetings; sharing of resources including proposal writing and

seeking out new sources of funding; implementation of pilot projects (e.g. respite care and housing); the development of a community resource team represented by all levels of professionals involved with young homeless parents; training in the philosophy of wraparound; greater awareness of what other agencies had to offer; knowledge of helpful and unhelpful services for young homeless parents; group conferencing to brainstorm strategies for complex cases; availability of funds for incentives “to go out of the box” (e.g. TTC tokens, food vouchers, frequent visiting, accompanying to appointments); and benefits of connecting with professional peers.

In addition, the service professionals paid great value to the informal partnership and relationships that had blossomed between them while participating in the formalized structure of the network. For example, they were able to support each other with the burden of vicarious trauma and burn out when handling extreme life conditions and repeated losses presented by street-involved young homeless parents:

The best that has come out of this [partnership] is the coordination – we know each other and our [mutual] clients. We can support each other [with] the frustration and the problems. We have also bent backward for each other to fill each other’s needs – [so] if I don’t have a space [name] will squeeze [my client] in...

As well, some service professionals looked to the network for support when their respective organizations failed to recognize the intense and complex nature of working with young parents or were limited in the support they could provide to their workers:

I needed to meet other people in the community doing the same work that I was doing because at the Center where I worked I was the only person from the social work standpoint that dealt with women who were pregnant or parenting ...I was seeking out support and [being involved in the partnership] provided me with support in the work that I was doing.

Wraparound process. Apart from the benefits gained from the YPNFA partnership, both parents and service professionals in this study concurred that the wraparound process itself had been very effective in “pulling services from all different areas and trying to coordinate them.” This helped to streamline the workload, reduce the stress of dealing with complex needs, improve the line of communication, and bring greater clarity in how the network was supportive. As service professionals said: “I didn’t feel so overwhelmed with my workload;” “it was a lot more clear what everybody around the table was doing to support this person;” “we could accomplish a lot more things when we worked together;” and it was a way to “encourage [the parent] to get involved in other agencies that could help them.”

For the parents, the wraparound process reduced the need to be “repetitive.” A wraparound meeting provided the venue where a coordinated service network came to the parent:

It’s bringing your help to you...it’s not like just you and a person in a room...but it’s like all of you at once...because they are all there to tell at the same time, ‘This is what I am feeling, this is what is bothering me and [I] need this to be done, I don’t know what I am

doing.’ I am sitting there [in the meeting and] one by one telling them...that’s how they all know by the end of the week.

For one parent, this ‘one-stop shopping’ concept to service coordination “really brings your stress level down” and eliminates the confusion and burden caused by conflicting messages given by several service providers to a young parent:

...because you don’t have to take 15 buses a week to 10 different appointments...being told how to hold your baby...hold the bottle, then another worker will say this is how you do it so there were like two or three different people giving information...different information, way too much information.

Increased Access to Community Resources

While participating in the wraparound process, parents in the study were able to access several resources in the community. The main areas of need that the participants identified were housing and income. Income maintenance involved planning for and engaging with employment, education, social assistance, and legal services.

Housing. The most frequently voiced need in the study was housing. A service provider said, “housing was an issue on every single one of the teams I sat on,” and a parent said, “finding an apartment was my biggest issue.” Housing was a major struggle that homeless parents faced. In the absence of affordable housing, parents were advised by system professionals to “stabilize” in a shelter as did one parent: “during pregnancy and just after the birth of my daughter I was staying in the shelter system.”

Shelters being a temporary measure, the goal within wraparound was to settle parents and their children into appropriate housing in the community. As well, parents stated that finding appropriate housing was a requirement of CPS in order to “get back your child.” However, finding affordable housing was a particular challenge for this population. One parent had been on the waiting list for subsidized housing for almost ten years. This substantial gap in affordable housing in the city was confirmed by a service provider: “... [parents] really do have trouble accessing appropriate housing and one that is affordable.”

Some parents were motivated to move into properties with market rent. They mentioned how the skepticism of landlords impeded their ability to get housed and maintain housing. Oftentimes they felt discriminated against making it difficult to get a lease or a receipt for rent paid. Conflicts with landlords made it necessary to keep moving: “over time we argue...so I have to move.” In addition, lack of income to afford market rents meant that parents and their children had to live in dire poverty: “I was getting \$1,381 in social assistance and my rent was \$950” or substandard housing conditions: “We were living down in the basement and the children can’t even breathe...windows are secluded with cement...you couldn’t even see sunlight.”

As well, living independently in the community brought with it its own set of fears for parents “of failing there [in the community] again.” A parent said, “I have no idea what I am doing, I was never taught [to live on my own]” and another parent worried about the cost of living independently: “it will be pretty much hard for me to get some stuff because I have to

save money [for debts to be repaid].” Further, living in institutionalized settings from a young age created barriers against community living where basic needs were considerably harder to meet. One service provider observed:

It is the norm for them [young parents] growing up in an institution...they ‘love’ jail, they ‘love’ the shelter system and when they are out they are lost because they have never had that. The shelters and the jails have been their family...[plus] they are financially better off [in institutions] than when on social assistance.

Bearing in mind the challenges and barriers for parents to achieve security in housing, the wraparound team focused on advocacy to achieve this goal: “[wraparound team] helped me to get in contact with them [agency] to update my file with subsidized housing...and in September they called me and gave me three places within the same month.”

As well, the team support extended beyond finding the housing to helping the parent transition into independent living. A service provider explained the level of support that wraparound offered:

[there have been] great successes...not only finding housing but maintaining housing. And what I mean by that is it’s one thing to say, “Here is an apartment,” which is usually way more than they can afford...but helping them to clean the apartment... [the team is relied upon to look for] furniture, how can we access food, get more money for rent or how can we access help for diapers.

Income maintenance. As is evident in the above quote, a major barrier to sustaining housing was the issue of finance. Being poor created many obstacles for parents when “in the middle of the month they can’t make ends meet...they are basically worrying, ‘Where is the food going to come from and how am I going to make the rent?’” This was a critical issue for all the parents in this study who were lone parents, unemployed, and on social assistance. One parent expressed the intense preoccupation with poverty and its profound effects on her family:

You can’t always deal with food banks, you do not know when they are open or when they don’t open like twenty four hours or everyday of the week...so if you are poor tomorrow and you don’t have food or money it is hard – you can’t support yourself, you can’t take care of your kids, it’s terrible, it’s like another third country where you can’t even eat one meal...I had to let go of my two kids. I had to do that because I did not have no requirements to give them what I needed to give them.

In spite of their poverty and feeling of helplessness, parents did express their dreams and hopes for themselves and their children in wraparound. One parent expressed how by going back to school and improving her opportunities in life, she could inspire her children: “I think [my going to school] will benefit them [children] a lot too, it might motivate them to take their studies more seriously.” Another parent hoping to find a job said; “I just want to be able to help my kids and be financially stable, because I know what it is to be poor.”

Therefore, in addition to stabilizing in housing, other measures were taken by the wraparound team to ameliorate the financial burden on parents and their families by facilitating access to resources that could change their income levels. Parents were connected to financial (social assistance, child support, school grants and subsidized day care), vocational, educational, and legal (e.g. immigration, custody, etc.) supports in the community. An individualized approach facilitated one parent who had difficulty at school to get “tutors working with her to get her prepared for the GED program so it wasn’t just a failed event in her life” and another parent who had no immigration status to “set up a plan to clean off my hospital bill and accomplish putting in my papers [for immigration status].” Some parents sought to re-enter the workforce and/or return to school, “I got a grant for \$2000...for a student studying with dependents and living in subsidized housing my rent will go down to a minimum of about \$100.00.”

Linkages with Therapeutic Programs

The participants in the study identified several needs in parents’ lives that required therapeutic interventions (such as, substance use, anger management, eating disorders, lifestyle planning and parenting skills) with the most frequently mentioned interventions being counseling for the parents and therapeutic day cares for the children. The participants said that parents needed to engage with therapeutic programs to deal with trauma from a history of life struggles and system pressures.

Parent struggles. The participants in the study stated that the physical and mental abilities of parents had been severely compromised by their life struggles of poverty, abuse, and losses. Service professionals in the study indicated that the parents who had sought their assistance were usually isolated:

...they don’t have families, they don’t have friends, they might have a few friends or a partner but it might be more of a negative rather than a positive...some of them have been abused not only by partners but by family members and friends as well.

A parent expressed how becoming a parent then isolated her further from her friends:

You are a parent now and you can’t hang out with your friends...your friends don’t have kids to understand you, they are going to clubs, you are changing diapers, different scenario. So you might feel isolated, you might feel lonely.

System pressures. As well, some parents expressed the intense trauma they felt from systems. In particular, parents spoke about system pressures from immigration and CPS. Some parents expressed how immigration challenges put their life opportunities on hold. A parent who had been in the country for nine years explained the fear that had stopped her from applying for status: “You hear a lot of stories that if you go and apply for your papers they pick you up and send you home and I didn’t want that so I was moving from place to place.” Another parent who had been a Crown Ward herself spoke of additional trauma that is imposed on a parent with no immigration status:

I did drugs, I sold drugs, I was going to clubs and parties because I was depressed. I couldn’t work, I couldn’t get an education, I couldn’t do anything...I wanted to have my

life established by now...I had no family, I have no friend, I have nothing. I wanted to go to school when I was seventeen. I needed two more credits to graduate then [but I felt like] “Why am I doing all this? I can’t go to college, I can’t get a loan, I don’t have a SIN card, I can’t do anything.” By the time I was twenty-one I was already supposed to be working for a few years. I have been here [in Canada] for twelve years and I still don’t have my immigration status. I can’t work, I can’t go to school, I can’t see a doctor, I can’t even go to a library because I have no ID! I have no status here.

Involvement with CPS was also a source of system trauma experienced by parents in the study. Parents spoke about the profound trauma they felt when they lost their children to CPS: “they [CPS] apprehended her when she was three months and that pretty much broke my heart...that was rough, really, really hard for me” and also as they feared separation from their children: “So I never bonded with him, I was so afraid he will be taken.” The trauma of separation was intensified as parents witnessed the impact on the physical and mental health of their children who were placed in care:

...she has 7 cavities because she lived in a foster home for six months.

...they [children] were crying because they had never been with anybody except me...so they were really traumatized, really traumatized. My oldest son developed a serious bed-wetting problem...he really started to go down [in his school grades].

Therefore, parents engaged with therapeutic interventions required by systems even though they felt intrusive:

They [CPS] make me go to this therapeutic day care...it’s a day care where you have to stay there with your child and workers observe how you act around your child and how you treat your child and they make notes on you and they send it to CAS.

Some parents engaged in therapeutic interventions to leverage their position with systems in an effort to keep or reclaim their children. One parent said that she accessed counseling in order to have written affidavits for CPS to make them understand that what she could do for her children was “more than what they are sitting there and observing in one day.”

It is evident that participation in wraparound was also a way for parents to leverage their position when overcome with system pressures. Wraparound provided a forum for parents to speak about system pressures and in the context of their life struggles. Parents could vent their feelings and go beyond by working on personally identified goals. In the process parents looked for meaningful ways to weave in therapeutic interventions in their plans so they could bolster their abilities in daily living and parenting their children. This young parent described the plan that she engaged in and found helpful to parent her newborn:

[I had] eating disorders and had someone helping me with that. I had help with him [newborn] trying to schedule him, feeding... Have someone nagging, “You got to do this, remember this.”...One worker came in from a wrap meeting to help me clean my room, because it has been so hard...so I had a lot of help.

Reconnection with Family and Community Networks

Many participants in the study spoke about valuable connections that happened for the parents who were involved in the wraparound process – connections with their children, their kinship and friends, and the service network.

Children. The main goal that young homeless parents wanted to achieve in wraparound was keeping their immediate family intact. This meant either eliminating the risk of apprehension of their children or reunification with children who had already been placed. The participants noted that participation in a wraparound process had resulted in having “a lot more kids staying with their moms.” There were several cases where CPS workers “had come to the table saying that the baby would be apprehended and then s/he wasn’t.” A parent whose children had been apprehended because she lived with a friend who had been arrested for drug trafficking expressed how her wraparound process had helped her to bridge the gap with CPS:

...my kids being with Children’s Aid and finally getting them back where a lot of people don’t [considering] the situation I was in...[it was because] when Wraparound got involved they [CPS] started to look at things differently.

Another parent regained custody of her child as she found housing, was working at school, and had access to subsidized day care.

Kinship and friends. Another connection that was facilitated for parents in wraparound was with their kinship and friends. The process of selecting informal persons in the parents’ lives to be on their team encouraged reconnecting and involving of families and friends: “all of her friends she had listed and all these aunts and uncles she was reconnecting with had said that they would help with the baby.” For another parent, wraparound was the turning point that got her reconnected with her family:

...she was living in a hole, she went from shelter to shelter to the most disgusting basement apartment I have seen in my life...she ended up going home to [name of city] with her child and reconnecting with her family...she is living in a condo and she is back in school and she is talking to her mother again.

For some parents, their family members were integral for providing supervision, temporary care, and permanent care for their children. Having the children stay within the family kinship gave greater access to the parent to see their children and not lose permanent contact.

Worthy of note in this study is the fact that only one participant identified the involvement of a partner in the wraparound team. Short-lived and unsupportive relationships with partners may have been the reason for their absence in the team selected by the parent. A service professional said that many of the young mothers had multiple partners that were involved with them for short periods of time. Some parents in the study indicated that they had been with their partners for a longer term of 3-6 years. Regardless of the time together, the parents did identify themselves as “a couple” when they were currently with a partner. As well, some parents in the study did receive support from partners whether they lived together or not. A parent who was no longer with her partner said that the father of her children was still helping to support “with the

bills and pay for food.” For another parent her “boyfriend” and her daughters were all the “family” she had.

Service network. The service network that the parent was currently involved with or could be involved with in the future was another important connection made in wraparound. It is apparent that part of the work in wraparound was to nurture positive and productive relationships with significant helpers in the parent’s network. Many participants in the study witnessed an adjustment of perceptions of the helping relationship between parents and service providers, particularly, child protection workers. A parent reflected on an earlier experience with a child protection worker before being in wraparound:

I think some of what happened to my other two kids was because I didn’t open up to CAS as much as I should have to let them know that I was going through a lot and the person that I was living with was verbally abusing me and managing our money in a way where we couldn’t do what we were supposed to do – such as, paying our bills and feeding the kids.

In the wraparound process both the parent and system professional had an opportunity to see that their goals were actually the same: “for the family to stabilize, to be secure, and happy.” In addition, what they learnt was that there were different ways that this goal could be accomplished and the dialogue around these pathways “opened up” the ability for both the parent and service professional to “hear each other.” In particular, when there were roadblocks to communication, the parent could voice the unreasonableness of a service requirement. A parent discussed how a CPS requirement to get a police check procedure hampered her ability to provide for her family:

I started to work during the day while they were at school...a lot of the time they [employer] wanted me to close [the store] but I couldn’t leave the kids with anybody...[CPS] said it would take three to six weeks for the police record check [for a sitter that I had found]...it took three months...by then I had lost the job because I couldn’t work at night.

Another parent who felt that a drug testing procedure was intrusive was able to use her voice in the wraparound team to bring about a resolution:

I agreed with [name] to do drug testing. They [CPS] wanted to supervise. I did not like that idea and I went to the team [as] I did not know what to do because I did not know how it would be done. So we had to find a way to do it supervised [in a way] that I did not feel so violated - and we did.

As parents and service professionals problem solved and dialogued in the wraparound team they began to align the perceptions of each other and began to see other opportunities for a helping relationship to develop in future interactions.

Problem-solving together as a team not only forged a helping relationship with existing service networks but also brought greater awareness of the various agencies, professionals and

their services in the community that the parent could tap into now or in the future. In particular, the parent learnt about those service professionals who were sensitive to the needs of homeless parents. As one service professional explained: “this population has different needs and [name of agency] is more in the informal range because it offers them a place to meet other young moms, to talk, and to access things like yoga, community kitchen...” Another service professional discussed medical professionals who “understand the issues of the women completely” and tailor their services in a way that they are accommodating: “if you are late for an appointment, it’s okay, you can re-book or you can wait to be seen.”

While participating in wraparound, parents learnt about services that were respectful and “gentle” especially when handling child protection issues. Plus, being involved as a team promoted continuity of contact for the parent with the individuals that they had connected with in the wraparound process “knowing that if you need support, somebody is there to give you an ear or a ride or to do something that is going to benefit your situation.”

Sustainability After Wraparound

The participants in the study were asked what had happened to parents in the year after they had graduated from wraparound. The participants said that when the wraparound process began the main focus was on issues that were impacting on the day-to-day lives of parents. Being burdened with meeting basic needs and not losing their children they rarely reflected on a future, “they really didn’t think they had one” or “there wasn’t any point wasting time to think about one.” As they proceeded to plan their goals and integrate little changes that had occurred in the wraparound process, they began to shift to a more future orientation in their thinking. They began to think about the prospect of education, a better job, and coming off welfare.

Seventy-five percent of the parents in the study were either planning education or enrolled in course work: “As soon as I get a place I will do computer courses...I have to go back to school.” Other parents were proceeding on to further education: “I finished high school after nine years and I am going to college in September.” Parents were thinking about their strengths and the types of careers they could aim for: “I like writing poetry...I like office work, paperwork...I [would] rather deal with a computer or a pen and pad...I wanted to be a medical secretary.” Another parent had worked with children and senior citizens and was contemplating a career in that field. Some parents had found jobs “working as a manager at a portrait studio.”

Parents in the study felt that “they had grown up”, they had gained “self-esteem” and “strength” and felt more confident to live their lives. Parents who were experiencing “hiccups” in life were still able to use the support they had found in the team. One mother was facilitating her own wraparound team to solve her immigration issues.

In addition, a service professional spoke of parents who “have gone and got married and they have a second baby.” One parent in the study became involved in community and leadership forums raising awareness of the issues of young homeless mothers through public speaking: “I was on this big mission to make sure that the world knows that young moms could achieve, could succeed, could be good moms.” Many parents were offering mentorship to other young mothers by volunteering their time on wraparound teams as informal members or becoming

facilitators of wraparound. These parents had organized into a Young Mom's Committee that acts as a resource to other young mothers for information, mentorship and education.

Limitations in Wraparound

The majority of the participants in this study said that the wraparound process was effective in helping parents to address identified needs and stabilizing their families to a level where they could assume normal life. As a minimum it gave parents a chance to improve and an acknowledgement of parent defined problems and goals that perhaps a service provider had not perceived prior to wraparound. Even for those who relapsed after being in a wraparound process "it at least [gave] them that opportunity [to improve their lives]."

Irrespective of the benefits of mere participation, the participants said that there were some limitations to a successful wraparound. The success of the wraparound process depended on the motivation of the parent, the motivation of the community to address the structural barriers that affect this population, and the resources available to the wraparound teams.

Motivation of Parent

The motivation of the parent was a necessary ingredient to success in wraparound. A parent said:

I don't want to give that ownership to the service because at the end of the day it is the individual's choice if they want to be a good parent; want to have good things. Then they have to get up and say I'm going to do this service. [The service] is there to give them [parents] an outlet to kind of achieve that and not holding them up like a puppet and guiding them through. They have to do it themselves, they have to want to, there has to be a will and a want.

The motivation of a parent depended on her emotional and mental ability to engage with the wraparound process. Some parents did not have the ability to take ownership of the process or put in the energy to do their share of the work in wraparound due to substantial physical or mental impairments and/or chronic life situations that impeded their efforts (e.g. developmental delays, addictions, constantly moving/running, feeling overwhelmed). In such instances the wraparound process was likely to break down. One service professional described how a process was "doing really well and fantastic and towards the end...she [parent] revealed that there were all these legal issues and the next thing she went underground because she could not be in the eye of the services anymore."

Sometimes parents felt that they were "forced" to be in wraparound and they did not have their own internal motivation to pursue the process. As a result, once the team was dissolved and the accountability was not there anymore, the parent relapsed. A service professional described how the process fell apart for one parent after she graduated from wraparound:

She was doing really well and then after they [wraparound] closed her file, she stopped accessing her services and basically she returned to her drug use and lost her child...now her child is in care and [CPS is] going for Crown Wardship.

For some parents a lack of trust for others, or fear that information told to wraparound facilitators will be reported, or fear that they may fail in their efforts caused parents to sabotage the process making stabilization more difficult. A parent said, “I am the type of person [that you] have to know me for fifteen years before I will tell you my middle name.” Resistance from the parent to do the work, or have the service providers at the table, or acknowledge the safety issues thwarted the progress in wraparound.

Further, for some parents the emotional baggage from the past was too weighted and interfered with the process. Parents were resistant to engage in treatment to heal from their emotional issues recognizing that this can only be done “on their time and when they are ready.” Sometimes emotional baggage surfaced while involved in the wraparound process. A service professional described how an event in a parent’s life had arrested her progress in wraparound:

She [parent] was present at an altercation and since then a bunch of her past stuff has started to come out and a fellow has been killed she has known and has been a friend of hers...so there is an example of a girl that was trying to get away from some of that but it is following her – the baggage.

Motivation of the Community

Another integral component to wraparound success was the motivation of the community. While the team did aggressively advocate where necessary, systems entrenched in bureaucratic procedures remained inflexible to meeting individualized needs. For one parent in this study, it was evident how systemic barriers had generated a sense of apathy that wraparound could not address. As a graduate of the wraparound process and still waiting for her immigration papers, this mother continued to live in a shelter with her child:

All issues branch out from [the] immigration [system]. I can’t help my children because I don’t have my immigration...so that’s the only thing I need help with. I don’t have a future...I don’t even want to change it. I got accustomed to life like that. That’s what I was born into...before I did want to change things – I had dreams and goals...now it’s like, “Why do I want all these things?” It’s pointless to want something because [I know it won’t change]. I am content with my life now [as it is].

In particular, larger social and economic disadvantages continued to plague the parents during and after graduating from the process. A service professional said:

Families are still struggling to feed themselves and clothe themselves and to deal with racial prejudice...lots of things are against them and wraparound can only help them to strengthen as individuals [but] the social barriers are outside of its control.

Therefore, it was evident that it was beyond the scope of the wraparound process to address the structural barriers by which the parents were affected unless the community had the capacity and was willing to partner in the process to effect change in impoverished social conditions.

Resources Available to the Wraparound Team

The amount and quality of the resource that was available to the wraparound team was an integral factor in moving the wraparound process forward for parents. Many of the parents led isolated lives and this presented a challenge to developing a dynamic and creative team of friends, family and professionals. Parents said that people in their informal networks were “pimps, drug lords who are beating up on us on the streets and I don’t want them on my team.” This in itself necessitated starting with a small and professionally weighted team.

A parent with a service heavy team felt that wraparound did not work for her because “sometimes the things you talk about in those meetings are not what you want to talk about, it’s what they [service providers] want to talk about.” Keeping the meeting neutral and empowering the voice of the parent in the team is the role of the facilitator. Although the parent is able to fire the facilitator, it is vitally important to get a good fit. If not, then “it makes it harder and harder for the youths to stay engaged.”

As well, some participants mentioned how a professional in the team may not be able to perform some of the tasks in wraparound that an informal could. For example, a professional might be too busy to follow a parent to appointments “and if the [parent] kept breaking their appointment they [professional] would give up to take on other clients.” Hence, if parents did not have appropriate support and resources in their team to meet their individualized need, there was potential that the parent would disengage.

In addition, a resourceful team needed the support of its management to actively engage the community to respond to the gaps identified in team. In particular, the participants in the study stated that for the wraparound process to remain viable for this population there needed to be more funding and more facilitators to provide a prompt response and reduce wait lists. As a parent advocated:

There are so many people on the waiting list...obviously there is a lot of people utilizing wraparound...and there are a lot of people waiting to utilize the services or get help or advocacy.

Further, service professionals mentioned the challenge of managing the current service capacity to reflect the growth of wraparound referrals from the consumers and the community and being able to respond quickly to young homeless parents before they have to disappear or become disconnected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The findings of the study discussed in this paper indicate that an outcome of the wraparound process was linkage with services to fit an individualized plan created with the parent. As well, the tailored services were better coordinated through honest and accountable communication in team meetings.

Given the complexity of needs of homeless young parents and the multiple services required to address these needs, wraparound must continue to be made available to this

population to bridge overlapping supports and provide a seamless service in a more effective manner. This is in keeping with the vision of YPNFA to build a network of agencies and organizations dedicated to building strong community partnerships to address the challenges for young pregnant and parenting youth under the age of 25 who are homeless, under-housed, street involved or at risk.

2. A significant success for parents in the study was advocacy to access subsidized housing. A move to housing was packaged with supports to set up the home and put in measures to have the basics needed to sustain a life in the community. Given the lack of affordable housing in Toronto and the impact of this situation on homeless parents, YPNFA must continue to assist these individuals to access subsidized housing through the wraparound process and challenge the community and political will to plan a change in the status of housing for those who are unable to afford market rents.

YPNFA has finalized an agreement with Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) to provide 20 units of housing for young parents (10 downtown and 10 in Scarborough) with supports provided by YPNFA partner agencies. In 2005, TCHC agreed in principle with YPNFA to build a housing project. This paper highlights the urgency to move ahead on this decision as one step toward a plan for accessible and affordable housing for homeless young parents in Toronto GTA.

3. Lack of housing leaves no option for homeless young parents but to take up temporary residence in a shelter. The shelter experience is quite traumatic for some parents and their children. Parents expressed how they “hated” and felt “drained” living in shelters commenting on the “turmoil,” “back-stabbing,” “scrutiny,” and quality of the living environment: “...you had to share with four different sets of people and some people smoke and it wasn’t healthy and that’s where my son got ill pretty bad.” Another parent: “they used to ground me, 22 years old being grounded...they treated me like a child when I was an adult.”

Given the traumatic experience of shelter living for some parents in the study, it is recommended that YPNFA engage shelter programs to evaluate their services and develop a model of service that is sensitive and supportive to the needs of this population. Helpful shelter services mentioned by some parents in the study were “professional in approach,” “confidential,” accommodated individual needs: “I was lonely [without my partner]...so they found a way to get us into a family shelter,” less rigid: “I liked it [shelter]...more independence and not on schedule,” supportive: “they gave me stuff that I could take for my son [so] I could use that money for something else,” and flexible: “they [name of shelter] were kind enough to take me back within such a short time, that was like one of my life-line and I thank them very much for that.”

4. Given the success of the wraparound process to mediate between parents and system professionals/requirements, the process continue to be used with young homeless parents whose children are at risk of placement. All the parents in the study identified trauma related to the loss of children to CPS. The goal of wraparound was to give the parent a forum to exercise her voice and ownership of the needs and solutions in her/her family’s life. The goals of parents and systems merged in the wraparound process and holistic plans took into account the needs of

parent, family, and community systems. As a result, several parents were able to resolve system conflicts: “A mother got a job, was supporting her child, got custody for her children, and CPS closed the case.”

5. Given the success of the wraparound process to connect parents with their kinship and friends, a proactive effort be made to help parents seek out the positive aspects of these relationships that might have been severed. In particular, a strategy be devised to effectively engage the partners and/or fathers of the children. A majority of the partners of parents in the study were not involved in the wraparound process because the young mothers could not see how they could fulfill a supportive role. One parent described the stresses that generate a rift between young parents which if addressed could result in more positive family bonds:

...[both parents] are struggling with the whole issue of being a young parent...the feeling of being a good parent and being out with friends...the guy may be getting the feeling that he is tied down and he gets out with his friends and hangs out and this does not go well with the baby's mom...so she calls him and she obstructs him and he is trying to enjoy himself and she feels all the responsibility is on her, he feels that she is always riding on him so there is a lot of communication breakdown...he is stressed because he does not have a job or if he was involved in the type of life that involved criminal activities for survival before the baby maybe he is having a hard time breaking through that...on the one side he is trying to be a good dad, father, role model - on the other side it is in his nature to sell drugs for a living...so there is a struggle for identity.

A few parents in the study described the support offered by fathers to their children indicating that this potential exists and may be requiring support for the unique challenges that fathers experience. This may be done within the wraparound process, through the recruitment of male outreach workers for positive role modeling, and/or in partnership with programs that have a focus on fathers looking at their needs as an individual and as a parent.

6. Given the unique role played by informal supports in the life of young homeless parents, YPNFA create a pool of mentors or volunteers from the community who can be engaged as team members to become mentors and positive supports for the parents involved in the wraparound process. As young parents are integrating in mainstream society, it becomes important to find new role models that can identify with this life and replace the lost connections with friends in the street.

7. Given the social stigma and structural barriers faced by young homeless parents, YPNFA proactively engage with systems impacting on this population to identify ways that their issues can be addressed. One parent expressed how young parents feel judged on a daily basis as they mingle in their community:

You feel that people are staring at you or they don't like you or they think you are so shameful...because you live in a world where you are not a good parent because you are a young parent and that's like the constant thing you are hearing...and that's hard.

Another parent who had immigrated to Canada nine years ago felt judged by strangers in her community because of her cultural diversity:

People around you would [stop and wonder], “What is she going to do, is she going to yell at him [her son]?” And then when you speak they see that I am not from here and they wait to see if how I take care of my son would be different.

YPNFA partnership and advocacy has already prompted system changes in medical, shelter and parent relief programs offered in the community. The findings of this study identify other systems, such as, immigration, CPS, education, employment, and social welfare that require system changes to deflect the harm to homeless young parents from structural barriers and social stigma.

8. Given the potential of relapse for some parents with chronic barriers after graduating from a wraparound process, the option of staying involved for two years be available to ensure that the parent has remained stable for a long time. While there is “a door back in” policy expressed at the end of a wraparound process, it appears that for some parents a prolonged process is required to reach a level of self-confidence to problem solve after graduation. The participants said that when the parents are empowered in an “organized” and working team they feel motivated when they see results - that by their own choice and smartness they are making change and supported by so many people offering their “direction,” “guidance,” “support,” and “friendship”. Working in team generates momentum in the challenges being surmounted and raises the motivation of the parent.

9. The parents’ motivation was critical to the success of the wraparound process: “it [wraparound] will help you if you want to help yourself.” The parents’ motivation was, in turn, reinforced by the motivation of the team: “it will work because we [are] there to help you in what you need.” When the parent graduated from wraparound, friends, kinship, and service professionals with whom trust and relationship had been forged in the 8 months to a year of working together remained available as a support network for the parent to use. As well, the parent had learnt to exercise self-agency to access this network of supports in order to brainstorm around future issues that may arise. However, for some parents specific conditions impeded their motivation to participate in wraparound.

Given the limitations identified in this study of the wraparound process being able to effectively address conditions that impede the motivation of parents (e.g. addiction, emotional trauma, mental health) YPNFA partner with service specialists to generate ideas of how to effectively involve parents with low motivation and include intensive services that may be required within the wraparound process.

10. While the majority of the participants in the study expressed satisfaction with the facilitation of their wraparound process, a few indicated that the facilitator required strong skills to manage people relations in a diverse team. As well, it was helpful if this individual had an empathic understanding of the issues facing homeless young parents. Given the multiple challenges that young homeless parents experience (e.g. housing, substance use, abuse, emotional trauma, pregnancy, transition to adolescence, poverty, CPS involvement, etc.), it is

recommended that relevant training and support be provided to wraparound facilitators working with this population to reduce the possibility of disengagement with parents and team members.

11. Given the current wait lists for wraparound and the recommendation that the service be extended for parents at risk of relapse, YPNFA seek funding to hire more facilitators and increase the program capacity. This study demonstrates the transient nature of the lives of homeless young parents. Therefore, it is imperative that the wraparound process becomes available immediately a referral is received in order to meet the parent within the time span of their temporary location and begin the work of stabilization. Failure to do this would delay the engagement process or lose the opportunity to offer support before the parent goes underground.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to outline the position of YPNFA concerning young homeless parents and their experience of the wraparound process. It is evident that a significant burden on young homeless parents results from their life struggles and system pressures that perpetuate losses of significant others, in particular, their children. These losses compound the trauma that led to parents disengaging with their kinship connections and resorting to a life on the street.

Parents spoke about the hardships of street life once they became parents and that they wanted a different life for their children than the one they had experienced. To this effect, they demonstrated a clear understanding of the kind of life that they aspired to for their children – one that involved strong family connections, stability in housing, non-toxic neighborhoods, sufficiency in basic needs, opportunities for growth, access to good education, availability of employment, and eradication of poverty.

Being involved in a wraparound process enabled parents, as a minimum, to reflect on their aspirations, renew their belief in their strengths, and make their voices heard. Being part of this intensive work, parents could feel “that all the help they could ask for has been provided to them so they have the feeling that they did their best [for their children].” This feeling was particularly significant in the healing for parents who had to acknowledge the reality of giving up their children to another care provider. But for many parents in the study, the most significant outcome in wraparound was reunification with their children.

In addition, many parents in the study were empowered in a self-directed, individualized, holistic, and strengths based wraparound process. This process provided a flexible and supportive environment to engage this population and bolster their self-efficacy, stabilize in community, and seek support from informal and formal connections made in wraparound. As well, a multiple service approach for this population was effectively managed facilitating service coordination, minimizing overlapping services, and reducing the burden on parents, as well as, service professionals.

Further, the process provided the momentum to take small steps toward change. These changes targeted immediate concerns (e.g. housing) and created room for the parents to focus on a future. Several parents had engaged post wraparound in education, career, and employment paths to change life circumstances. However, some parents continued to experience personal,

societal, and systemic barriers after graduating from wraparound that impeded their ability to move forward.

This indicates that the sustainability of success for a young homeless parent in wraparound depends on her ability to continue with the momentum gained in the process and the level of community ownership of the social barriers faced by this population stigmatized from being young parents, single, homeless, female, and poor. Several parents in this study did try to address structural barriers by trying to access education. Research shows that an educated single parent may have higher self-efficacy to compete in the market force and manage parenting and life stressors (Harris, 1996; Jackson, 2000).

However, for the majority of the participants, there was an urgent need to sensitize the community and organizations about the issues facing young homeless parents and prompt action to create opportunities for self-sustained living. Indeed, community ownership is crucial to implementing and expediting the wraparound process (Debicki et al., 1998). YPNFA is in an advantageous position in that it has already cemented working relationships with multiple service providers. This work needs to expand into the broader community in line with the wraparound principles of community ownership and inclusion.

Regardless of challenges identified, all the participants in the study strongly urged that young homeless parents and their children be allowed to participate in a wraparound process so that they can endeavor to embark on a life of normalcy in community. As one parent said: “If it weren’t for this [wraparound] I wouldn’t be here right now, I would be back in the dumps.”

APPENDIX A

Wraparound with Street-Involved Young Homeless Parents Discussion Guide for Focus Groups/Individual Interview

Relationship to YPNFA

1. What is your relationship to YPNFA?
2. How long were you/have you been involved with this project?
3. If a partner of YPNFA/Oolagen – what has this partnership been like (i.e. benefits, challenges, etc.)?

Challenges for Young Homeless Families

4. Can you describe the kind of issues that you /young homeless moms experience?
5. How do these issues affect you/them as individuals? What are the consequences?
6. How do these issues affect your/their children? What are the consequences?

Wraparound as an Intervention

7. Those of you who used the Wraparound program/For the persons that you assisted to use the Wraparound program, what was your/their life situation before wraparound?
 - a. What happened during wraparound?
 - b. What happened in the year after wraparound ended?
 - c. What is going on in your/their lives now?

Effectiveness of Wraparound

8. Tell me what you know about the Wraparound program?
 - a. What does it bring to people generally?
 - b. What does it bring to young homeless moms?
9. Does wraparound work for young homeless moms?
 - a. If no, what is it about wraparound that doesn't work?
 - b. If yes, how do you know that it works?

- c. Do you think that being involved with the wraparound program has improved your/their life in any way? If so, how?
 - d. Do you think that participation in the Wraparound program has benefited your/their children in any way? If so, how?
 - e. What are the most important changes that you have observed in their/your life/children since they/you were involved in the program?
10. Apart from young homeless families, has wraparound been used for other persons with multiple disadvantages?
- a. If yes, how has it worked or not worked for them?

Service History and Sources of Help

11. Can you describe other sources of help that you/young homeless moms have used?
- a. What are they? Professional? Informal?
 - b. Have they been helpful? If yes, to what extent or how have they been helpful?
 - c. If no, to what extent or how have they been unhelpful?
12. How would you compare these helping sources with wraparound?
- a. Anything unique or different about wraparound?

Closure

13. This brings us to the end of my questions. Before we end, I want to provide you with a chance to ask me questions or discuss anything we might have missed.
- a. Is there anything else you want to say about your experience with wraparound that we have not already covered?
 - b. Do you have any questions for me?
 - c. How was the interview experience for you?
 - d. How were the questions – anything else we should ask? Anything we should not ask?

Thank you for your participation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The YPNFA commissioned study on wraparound with street-involved young homeless parents discussed in this document was funded by the Ontario Works Incentive Fund.

The implementation of the above research study and compilation of this position paper would not have been possible without the participation of the parents and service professionals who agreed to share their in-depth experiences about using the wraparound process. The author deeply appreciates their contribution.

Special thanks are due to staff at Wraparound (Oolagen Community Services) who assisted in the recruitment of participants for the study and YPNFA representatives Cathy Blocki-Radeke, Alice Gorman, and Julie Maher for their editorial feedback, ongoing patience, and support to complete this project.

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ABOUT YPNFA

Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) is an interagency network of several community agencies in Toronto servicing homeless, street-involved youth who are pregnant or parents. Members of this network are committed to developing comprehensive and coordinated responses to needs identified, finding solutions that work while respecting the young parents, and ensuring the health and safety of the children.

The network has established itself as a strong unified entity and has built trusting relationships with each other, as well as, with the population of youth that it serves. The group collaborates in writing joint proposals and shares responsibility to advocate for a high level of support in the community that serves homeless youth.

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