



Driving Systems Change  
In Child Welfare

# TOU x NCSL Youth Homelessness

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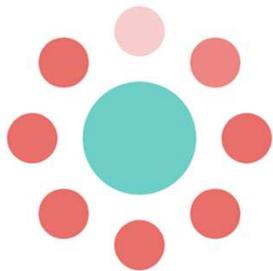
## Our Mission

Think of Us is an R&D lab for child welfare, driving systems change so that the youth and families most impacted by the system have the greatest power and opportunity to reshape it.

## Our Vision

A world where every person  
has the conditions they need  
**to heal, develop, and thrive.**

# Our work: Bridging the divide between policy, practice, and people.



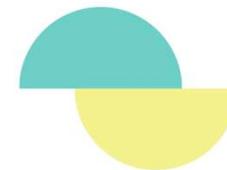
## **Spark** breakthrough strategies

Catalyzing new ideas that multiply impact across the child welfare ecosystem and beyond.



## **Support** lived experience integration

Leveraging research and data to promote practices that center lived experience.



## **Co-Drive** large scale systemic initiatives

Spearheading bold projects that have the potential to fundamentally change child welfare.



## The Current Situation

**20,000 foster  
youth age out  
of foster care  
with little to no  
family support.**



## The Current Situation

**Case workers  
use paper  
based plans  
& referrals.**



## The Current Situation

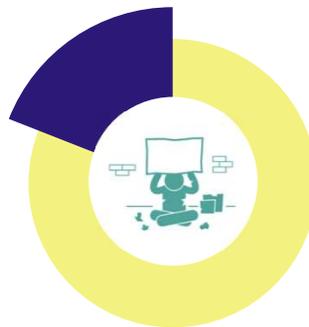
**Need for building collaborative tools that youth, staff & supportive adults can benefit from.**



# Leads to difficult outcomes for 20,000 youth aging out annually...



Only **1/2** will be **employed** at age 24



**1/5** will become **homeless** within two years of aging out at 18



**Less than 3%** will earn a college degree

# The Current Situation: Youth Homelessness

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) approximates

**700,000**  
foster youth ages 13 to 17

+

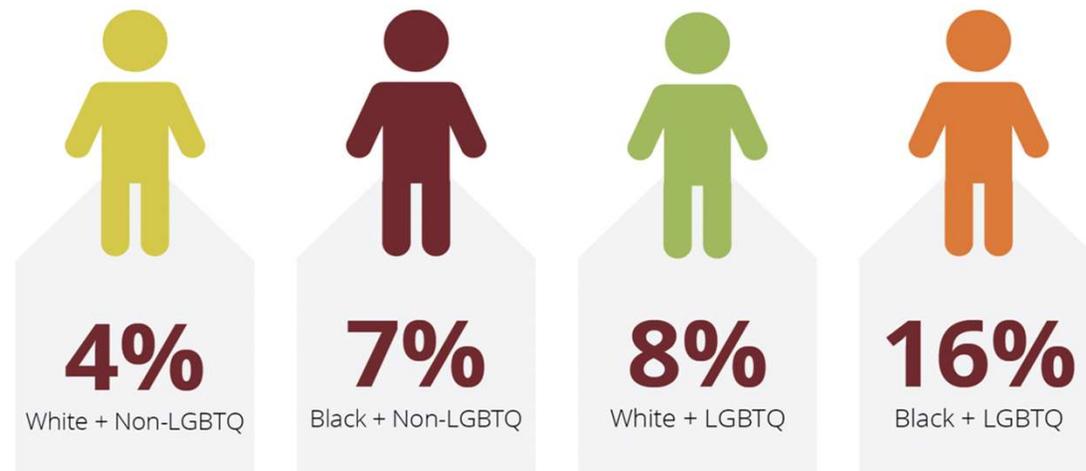
**3.5 million**  
young adults ages 18 to 25

experienced homelessness within a 12-month period because they were sleeping in places not meant for habitation, in shelters, or with others while lacking alternative living arrangements.

# The Current Situation: Youth Homelessness

Youth who are black *and* LGBTQ reported the highest rates of homelessness

Explicit homelessness over the last 12 months, self-reported by young adults, ages 18-25. These estimates do not include reports of couch surfing only.



(Source: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago)

What do we mean by transition-age youth?

# Hasan, 17

Brooklyn, NY



## Grappling with the incoming cliff

### Background Information

Hasan is almost 18. He is a Black high school student, with a part-time job. Hasan has a six-month-old son, with whom he wants to have a relationship, even though he struggles with getting enough money to care for him.

### Length of time in care

Hasan has been in and out of foster care since he was a toddler. He got involved in juvenile justice when he was nine.

### First interaction with foster care

At age 3, Hasan entered care when a neighbor reported his mother had left him home alone for a day. She had been struggling to leave an abusive, domestic violence relationship and was trying to get a job.

### Current Placement

Hasan is currently in a group home, though he considers living independently after he turns 18. However, he is worried if he can afford rent and cover his and his son's needs.



# Data Network



# Microcash Grant Map - by county



Version 1 of Needs of Applicants

County: **Los Angeles County**  
 State: **CA**  
**Total Number of Applicants 4,375**  
 Assumed Chafee Eligible 3,452  
 Assumed Family First Eligible 1,189  
 Possible Parent 1,189

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**Housing:**  
 Coach on Avoiding Eviction: **505**  
 Request Help on filling out a Housing Application: **818**  
 Requested a HUD Housing Voucher: **2,107**  
 Requested Advice On Couching Surfing during the Pandemic: **223**  
 Requested Advice On Renting: **1,375**

**Work:**  
 Experienced Cut Hours: **952**  
 Requested Preparing for an Interview: **840**  
 Requested Help Writing a Resume: **858**  
 Currently Laid Off: **930**  
 Requested help Networking for a Job: **1,815**  
 Experiencing a shortage of gig work: **696**  
 Reported they don't know what they need: **495**  
 Unsure of what will happen with their employment: **416**

**Food:**  
 Requested donated Groceries: **1,174**  
 Help Apply for Stamps App: **1,136**  
 Requested apps that help you find food: **1,573**

**Health:**  
 Help Find Dr: **302**  
 Help Get Insurance: **227**  
 Help Pay Therapy: **394**  
 Speak With Mh: **728**  
 Speak With Peers: **1,361**  
 Text Mh Coach: **863**

**Money:**  
 Help Apply for Public Assistance: **603**  
 Help secure a Bank Account: **762**  
 Help create a Budget: **1,523**  
 Help apply for Unemployment: **525**

State: (All) ▾

Race: (All) ▾

LGBTQIA: (All) ▾

Possible Parent: (All) ▾

Kinship Care (all ages): (All) ▾

System Status: (All) ▾

Currently experiencing uns...: (All) ▾

Housing Current: (All) ▾

Food Situation Current: (All) ▾

Education Current: (All) ▾

Money Situation Current: (All) ▾

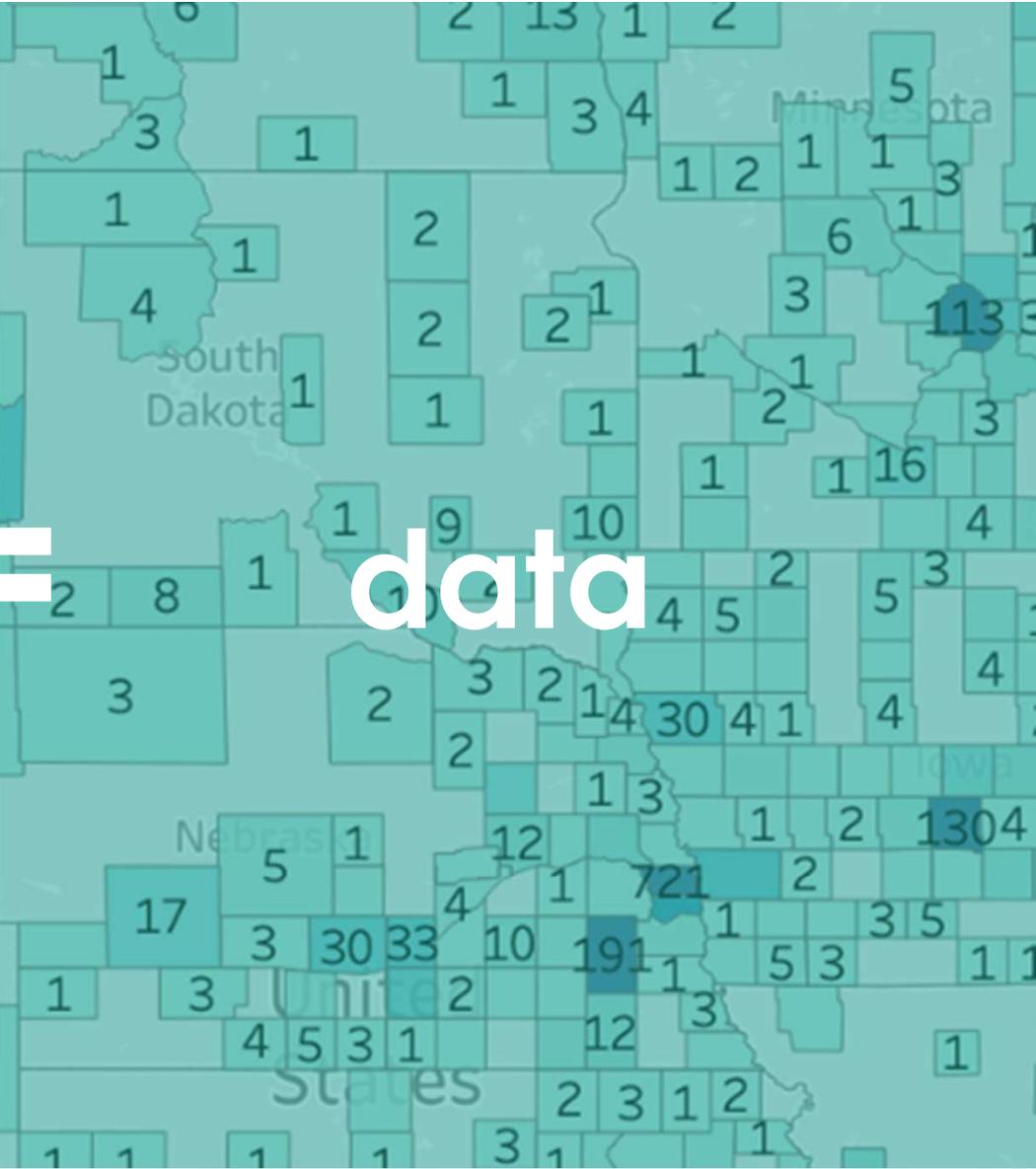
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# Microcash Grant Map - housing needs



% of housing stability

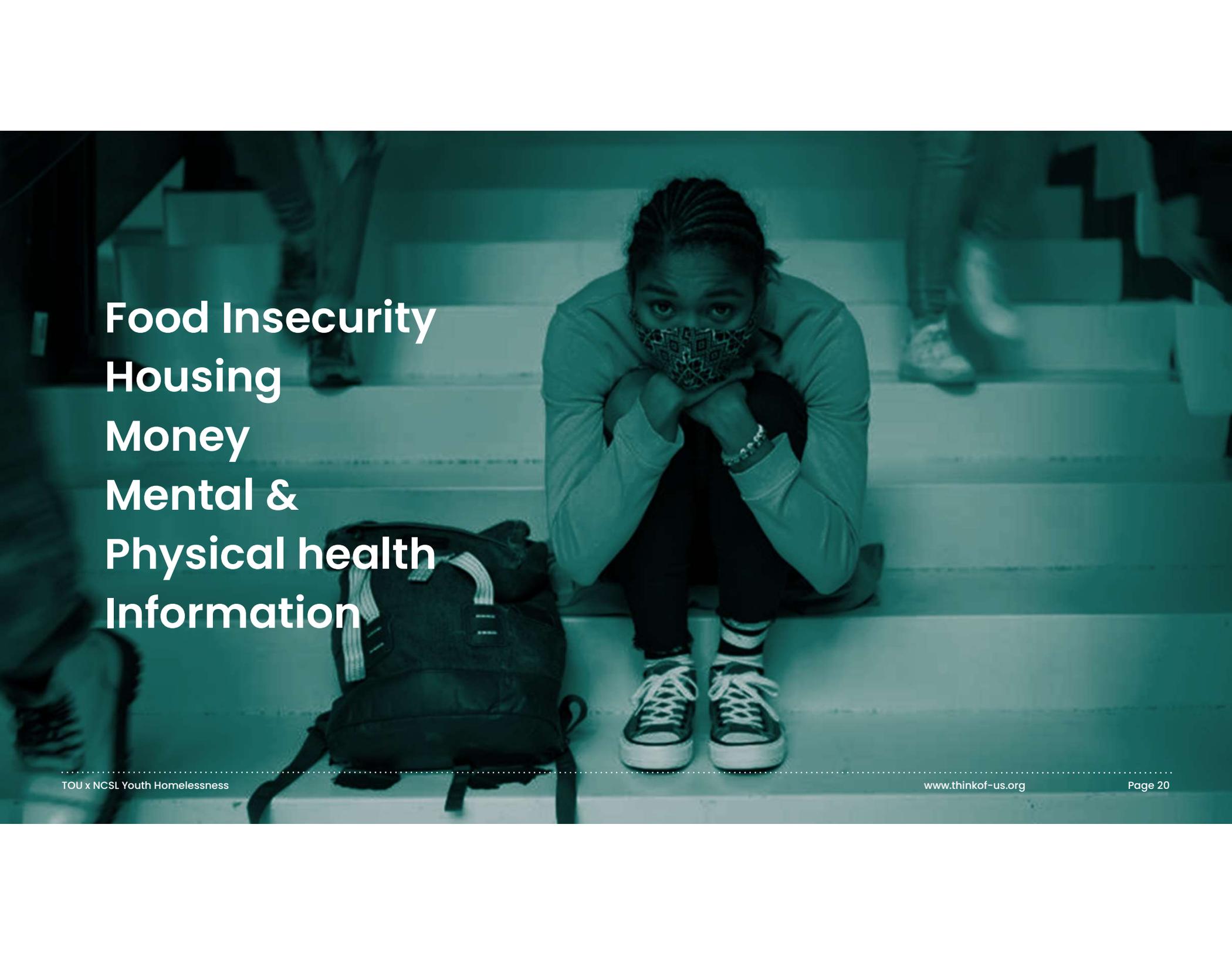
Housing Prepandemic	Housing Current										
	College/Dorr Housing	Couch-surf..	Foster Home	Group home/Reside	Homeless	Living with a Family Member	My own place	Other	Shelter	Staying with a friend wit..	System placed me with a fam..
College/Dorm Housing	45.45%	4.76%				1.79%	5.23%				
Couch-surfing		42.86%			14.29%	1.79%	4.07%	4.35%		8.33%	6.25%
Foster Home	36.36%	4.76%	78.57%	33.33%		16.07%	9.30%	13.04%		12.50%	31.25%
Group home/Residential		14.29%	12.86%	54.17%	7.14%	7.14%	2.91%	13.04%		8.33%	12.50%
Homeless					35.71%	3.57%	5.81%	13.04%	20.00%	4.17%	
Living with a Family Mem..		14.29%			21.43%	48.21%	4.07%		20.00%	16.67%	
My own place		9.52%	1.43%		14.29%	8.93%	65.12%	8.70%		37.50%	6.25%
Other		9.52%	2.86%	4.17%		5.36%	1.74%	34.78%	20.00%	8.33%	
Shelter				4.17%	7.14%		1.74%		20.00%		
System placed me with a ..	18.18%		4.29%	4.17%		7.14%		13.04%	20.00%	4.17%	43.75%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%



**lived  
experience = data**

# Our Response

**COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on former foster youth and Kin – meeting their immediate basic needs as well as securing the building blocks to achieve self-sufficiency.**

A young woman with her hair pulled back is sitting on a set of concrete stairs. She is wearing a patterned face mask and has her hands clasped in front of her face, looking directly at the camera with a somber expression. A dark backpack is on the step next to her. The background shows other people's legs and feet on the stairs, suggesting a public transit or crowded area. The entire image has a teal color overlay.

**Food Insecurity**  
**Housing**  
**Money**  
**Mental &**  
**Physical health**  
**Information**

# Immediate Needs



Prices for **food** are being raised at my local supermarket and I barely have enough money to pay my rent next month.



Myself and other former foster youth ages 25 and up have all **lost our jobs** and we have no family to lean on.



I lost my apartment when I was pregnant and I started getting on my feet again when the pandemic started but now I'm not allowed to work. I've been couch-surfing with my sister and my baby. Now with all of this, **it makes it hard to find places to sleep at night**

# Our Rapid Response to COVID

Two Town Halls  
that engaged  
over 4,500 child  
welfare leaders,  
youth and staff.

Stood up  
Command  
Center

Informed older  
youth  
permanency  
Executive Orders

Lead or inform  
over 22  
Regulations that  
have passed

Bill on the hill

In December 2020, Congress released more than **\$400M in emergency funds** for current and former foster youth in response to the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. States were tasked with eligibility verification and distribution to young people.

# “We did something that was supposedly impossible.”

- Sixto Cancel, TOU



**44 states**

and D.C. had data transferred to them effectively



**24 states**

used the 'Check for Us' application as part of their official verification process

**30k+ alumni**

found and connected via the 'Check for Us' campaign\*



**87.5%**

of applicants applied from a mobile phone



**95.5%**

application completion rate for those who specified their state



\*35+% of eligible population in CA where we had official state contract

# Check for Us: Housing Needs

	# of youth (all)	% of youth (all)	# of youth (extended care)	% of youth (extended care)	# of youth (no longer in care)	% of youth (no longer in care)
Currently Experiencing Homeless	2956	12.52%	493	8.61%	2022	15.94%
Requested Housing Vouchers	7439	31.52%	1767	30.84%	4456	35.14%
Requested Rent, Utilities, or Household Item	12479	52.87%	2997	52.31%	7514	59.25%
Requested Either Housing Support	15014	63.61%	3571	62.33%	8988	70.87%

# Policy Milestones

## 1974

*The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act* (RHYA) (P.L. 93-415) was the first shift in federal policy to assist youth experiencing homelessness. This law has been reauthorized several times.

## 1987

*The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (P.L. 100-77) major federal legislative milestone for youth homelessness that supports the enrollment and educational opportunities for youth experiencing homelessness and removes barriers in accessing to education. McKinney-Vento is set to be reauthorized this month.

## 1999

The John H Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood created under *the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999* (P.L. 106-169) provides states funding to support transition-aged foster youth for housing, education, and independent living services.

## 2008

*The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* (P.L. 110-351) increased federal funding for states to extend services for youth after age 18 until 21 if they attend school, work, and/or have a medical exemption.

## Federal assistance targeted specifically to current & former foster youth:

**Family Unification Program (FUP)** is a special purpose under the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program exclusively for child welfare-involved families and former foster youth. Public Housing agencies (PHAs) administer FUP in partnership with Public Child Welfare Agencies (PCWAs). FUP vouchers used by youth are limited.

**Foster Youth to Independence (FYI)** a HUD initiative designed by youth to supplement the FUP by directing additional vouchers to youth aging out of foster care and at risk of homelessness. In December 2020, a version of FYI was codified, along with other youth-focused changes to FUP, via the *Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities for Youth Act*, enacted as a part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260).



# Collecting the Raw Data to Co-design

Centering Lived Experience

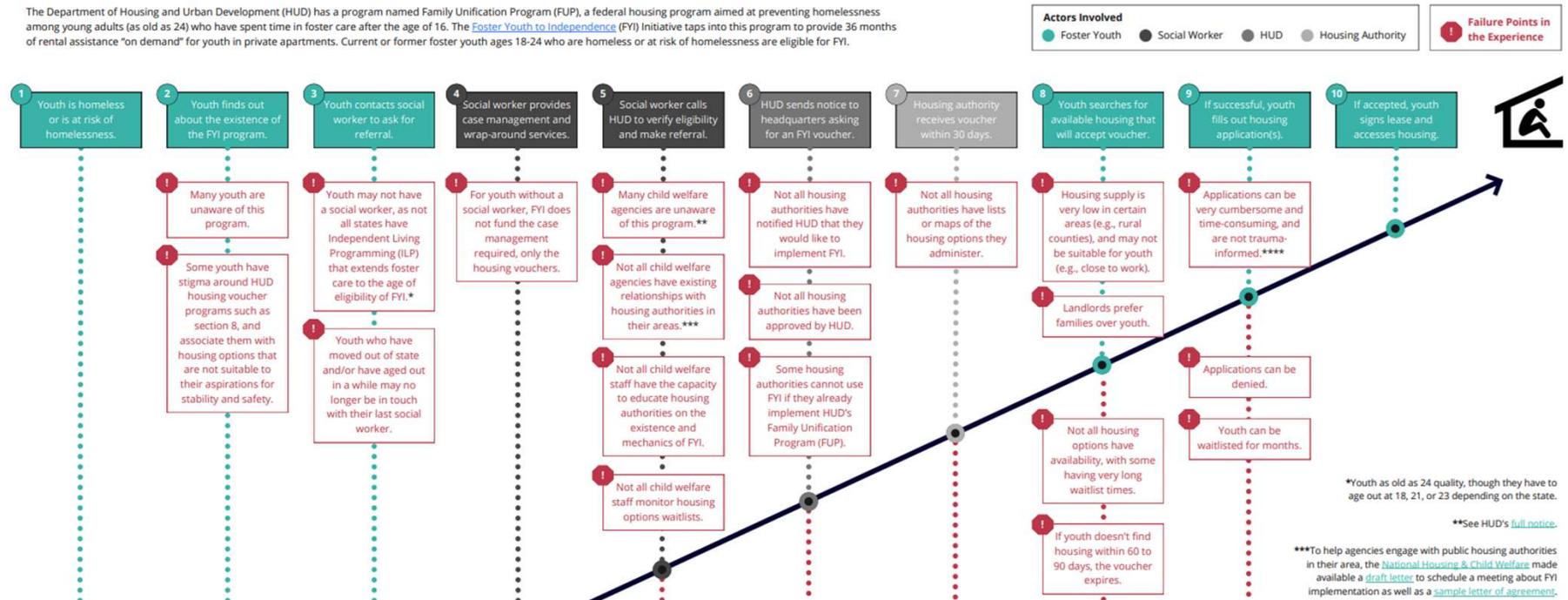
## What is a discovery sprint? A starting place

- A discovery sprint is a fast-paced, human centered design activity, that is useful when trying to understand human attitudes, mental models, and experiences with a technology product, service, system, or a policy.
- This qualitative method is frequently used in technology design, service design, and increasingly in policy design to generate insights that can inform the design of a technology product, the design of a service, or the design of a policy.
- While the methods used in this discovery sprint draw from social science disciplines, such as ethnography and anthropology, this is not considered to be academic or scholarly research.
- Discovery sprints gather information directly from people experiencing the conditions we want to change and use their words, experiences, testimonies, and individual and collective expression to understand what needs to change.

# Use Case: Foster Youth Independence Initiative

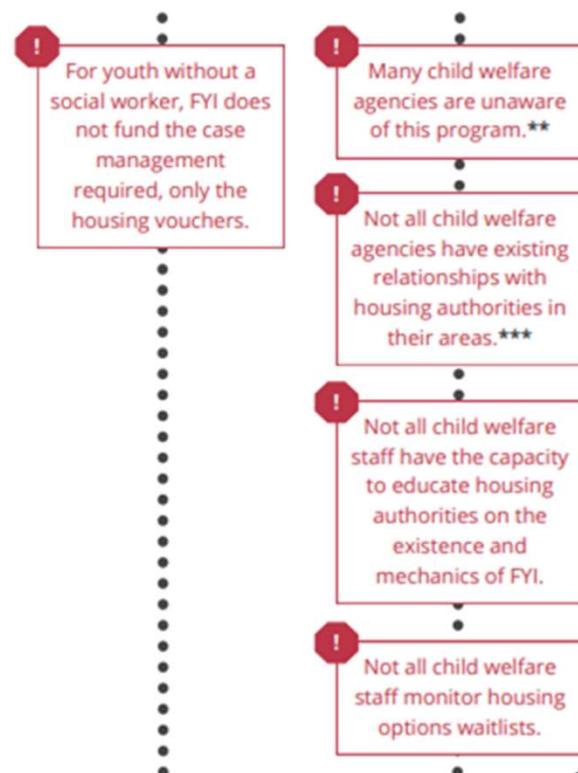
## The Experience of Applying for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a program named Family Unification Program (FUP), a federal housing program aimed at preventing homelessness among young adults (as old as 24) who have spent time in foster care after the age of 16. The [Foster Youth to Independence](#) (FYI) Initiative taps into this program to provide 36 months of rental assistance "on demand" for youth in private apartments. Current or former foster youth ages 18-24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are eligible for FYI.



# Use Case: Foster Youth Independence Initiative

- **Problem:** During the pandemic, young persons aging out of foster care systems throughout the United States had **no housing despite federal funding.**
  - 25 million dollars in voucher but **very little drawdown**
  - **Everyone had a different reason for why this was happening**
- We **launched a very fast discovery sprint** (shadowed youth, participated in onboarding phone calls, helped youth with their applications, assisted youth navigate HUD's system)
- We mapped our findings



# Use Case: Foster Youth Independence Initiative

## Think of Us picked two barriers to focus on.

- Clarification that HUD definition of case management is different than child welfare definition (interpretation) [worked with lived experience + policy expert]
- Technical assistance focused on one aspect of the MOU process between the public housing agencies and child welfare agencies [funded an alumni who knew the process to be a housing fellow]

## TOU leverage these insights to spark and support others working the issue

- Communicated the opportunity to federal agencies and state child welfare leaders
- Silent campaign backed the unknown experts
- Shared the barriers with others working the field so that they can pick a place to address
- Collected over 11,000 applications who requested a voucher

## Result:

- Total pot of money has increased from \$25 million to \$153 million
- In 5 months, the Senior Housing Fellow and partners have been able to establish 28 housing programs
  - 28 housing sites can issue 50 vouchers = 1,400 housing vouchers
  - 1,400 vouchers x average voucher of \$7,500 = \$10,500,000 per year

## What happens after the discovery sprint?

- Share insights generated from the discovery sprint with the steering committee to determine what this initiative is uniquely positioned to take action on
- Share insights with community lead existing efforts to support the build
- Identify and communicate gaps and support the co-creation of intervention
- A human-centered design firm can then have the adequate information and relationships to co-designing and prototyping with the community



# Think of Us Areas of Opportunity

# Considerations for States

- **Increase Awareness about Access to Foster Youth Independence Vouchers.** State Housing Authorities and Child welfare Agencies often do not collaborate and work together to serve young people. Ensure that young people are aware of housing opportunities available and that these state agencies are working hand in hand.
- **Strengthen the Workforce.** Investing in caseworkers, social workers, and jurisdiction administrators can help provide strong support for these young people and families.
- **Consider investments in Extended Foster Care.** We know from young people that extended foster care has helped foster youth transition to adulthood and has provided stability, opportunity, and supportive and meaningful connections. When youth age out of foster care unprepared, they face challenges including homelessness.
- **Center Lived Experience.** Look for opportunities to invite and provide lived experiences voices a seat at the table when making policy decisions. You might consider hosting a roundtable event, holding educational opportunities for you and your colleagues to hear directly from foster youth, providing internship opportunities, etc.



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Q&A

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