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The Impact of Housing and Homelessness on Child Well-Being
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No One Can Thrive Alone: Exploring the Host Home Option

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When thinking of the things we say to those we love, it is hard to know what will make a difference. The first week that Amy came to live at my former partner Sharon's yellow house in North Minneapolis, it had seemed like the right thing to say, even though it had felt awkward and absurd to me; "Of course we won't make a sexual overture to you. Or strike you." Amy did not have an obvious reaction at the time. The reaction came years later, when she was speaking at a fundraiser for the Twin Cities GLBT Host Home Program, the program that had brought us together. When Amy tried to talk about what those statements had meant to her, she choked up. I knew how excruciating it would be for her to cry, or in her words, "be weak" in public. At 4'8", Amy might be short, but she's got a swagger that gives her a bigger presence. I walked over and stood behind her. I placed my hands on her shoulders: They were trembling. The statements had not been obvious to her.

I legally adopted Amy, who once was homeless. I learned a simple truth from Amy:

In order for young people who are homeless to thrive, they need more than beds, meals, GEDs, and jobs. They need what we all need – a secure connection with people who care about them.

When I founded the Minnesota Host Home Network (Network) in 2014, I wanted to champion caring nonpaid adult relationships for youth experiencing homelessness. I thought exposure to the host home model, along with networking and technical assistance, could propel communities to start programs like the one in which Sharon and I had trained to become hosts. We did not know Amy until she chose us – a decision based on a letter we had written. Prospective hosts are required to write such letters. They are written in advance and aren't addressed to a specific teen.

At the Network's first quarterly huddle of social-service staff and community volunteers from across Minnesota, the challenges of the stranger-match model became apparent. Those in the conference room said they struggled to find community members who were willing to open their homes to traumatized teens.

Over the course of subsequent huddles, three groups either dropped or scaled back plans to start stranger-match host home programs. Volunteers in Elk River, a small exurban community north of Minneapolis, realized they couldn't ask others to host when they weren't willing themselves, so they chose to open a drop-in center instead. Open Doors for Youth has already expanded due to demand.

Starting a drop-in center – especially in a semi-rural area with minimal support for young people who lack housing – ended up making more sense than starting a host home program. Recruiting volunteers to tutor or take a shift in the clothes closet was much easier than asking them to host a youth 24/7. Open Doors for Youth also plays an educational function by helping Elk River community members understand that youth homelessness is a local problem, not just something that happens in the cities.

While stranger-matches can work, we must pay attention to what youth do when they first realize they cannot stay at home. For

Best Practices for Host Homes

Based on site visits, research into innovative practices in foster care and mentoring, and quarterly huddles with social service providers and community volunteers, the Minnesota Host Home Network has identified six best practices for host homes, which apply to both formal stranger-match programs as well as informal hosting arrangements.

Youth Agency	The primary factor that differentiates a host home from foster care is that a host home is not a placement. The youth chooses to be in the host home. Sometimes youth are able to find hosting arrangements with adults they already know. In a stranger-match program, a youth may have the opportunity to choose among prospective hosts.
Shared Identity	According to research, one of the strongest predictors of match longevity is whether a mentor and youth are the same race. However, stranger-match programs tend to recruit white middle-class volunteers. Therefore, if a youth is a low-income person of color, the matched individuals have the added stress of negotiating cultural fissures around race and class. The Twin Cities GLBT Host Home Program addresses this issue by training prospective hosts on white privilege. Ensuring that hosts in this program share a queer identity with the youth (or are queer-affirming) also helps mitigate the stranger match and assists with recruitment.
Supportive Community	In many communities of color, informally hosting youth who need housing is a cultural norm. A supportive social norm counteracts the stigma of homelessness and helps the host family feel connected to the larger community. A supportive community also offers an approachable funding base to underwrite a host home program.
Support for Youth Support for Hosts	Expecting the host to do it all is unrealistic. The GLBT Host Home Program has a dedicated case manager who meets regularly with the youth, while the program director provides support for the hosts. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe have a Host Home Program that supports kinship hosts with modest monthly stipends. External support for both parties can help stabilize a hosting arrangement.
Shared Expectations	Informal hosting arrangements often start as a temporary solution. If tensions arise, the youth may opt to leave. Creating a shared agreement about the length of stay, goals for the youth, and house rules can build a shared understanding that provides a helpful basis for navigating conflicts that may arise.

example, desperate and enterprising youth often work their networks, arranging to stay with people they already know. Sometimes they end up couch surfing. The situation can often be unsafe, and may even involve survival sex. However, many times arrangements are made with a parent of a friend, a neighbor, or a relative. Sometimes these arrangements become long-term, creating an ongoing, supportive, stable home.

At Network huddles, we have taken to calling such arrangements “informal host homes.” Rather than helping communities start stranger-match host home programs, we are now planning to investigate how drop-in centers could serve as support hubs for these informal hosting arrangements, perhaps offering mediation when tensions arise or financial support. Amy continues to surprise me in the best possible ways. She is now a supervisor at her job, and she and her wife just completed training to become foster care parents for young children.

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What makes a host home work? Host Home Best Practices, developed by the Minnesota Host Home Network, provide a support framework for host homes. Displaying the best practices at the July 2016 huddle are network director Jacqueline White (bottom right), community volunteers from North Star Youth Outreach in Washington County and Open Doors for Youth in Elk River, and staff from the Anoka YMCA Host Home program and Lutheran Social Service homeless youth programs in Duluth, Mankato, and Rochester. Staff from Avenues for Homeless Youth in the Twin Cities and Leech Lake tribal nation's host home program also participate in the Network's quarterly huddles.

