

# A Whole Person Approach to Homeless Youth Development

Prepared by the Reciprocity Foundation

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## ABSTRACT

The Reciprocity Foundation pioneered a “Whole Person” approach to help homeless youth—many of whom are chronic users of the shelter system—to develop the skills and means to manage all aspects of their lives and fully realize their potential as human beings.

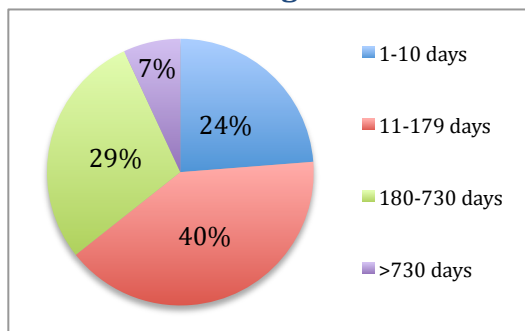
## Why Whole Person?

The population of homeless youth is far more diverse than most Americans would imagine. Some are runaways who have been out on the streets for days, others have been discarded by their families and have lived in and out of shelters for years.

Well known interventions such as crisis housing, Transitional Living Programs and GED/employment programs can deliver positive results—but not all youth respond equally to these programs. Some youth simply need more or different kinds of interventions to cultivate the confidence to survive outside the shelter system. In addition, most agencies have difficulty tracking the sustainability of these interventions. As a sector, we are not sure whether these programs create temporary relief or long-term change in our clients' lives.

Another issue is the growing number of homeless youth who become “Chronic Users” of the shelter system. Chronic Users as defined as persons whose stay in a shelter exceeds 730 days and averages nearly 1,000 days (see Table 1). According to the NY Department of Homeless Services, Chronic Users account for 7% of homeless adults.

**Table 1: NYC Average Shelter Use**



Source: Department of Homeless Services, NYC 2004

With costs ranging from \$25,000-35,000 per year for youth living in a crisis shelter and \$30,000-38,000 per year for youth housed in a Transitional Living Program, it is clear that we simply can't afford to house Chronic Users, particularly during times when homelessness is on the rise.

An independent survey conducted by the Reciprocity Foundation revealed another important fact—that the majority of homeless youth visit between 2 and 6 different agencies *per day* to receive needed food, shelter, medical care, employment training, counseling and/or educational support. Not only is this system of care inefficient, it also places an enormous strain on youth who must go to school, work and meet curfews in order to maintain housing. It creates a situation in which youth are not able to build trusted, long-term relationships—the kinds of relationships which enable youth to gain their independence from the shelter system.

A final point: the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) in New York City has recently focused its efforts on reuniting homeless youth with their families. The DYCD suggests that 60% of youth living in crisis shelters and 80% from Transitional Living Program can be reunited with their families. Our 2011 survey indicated that 81% of our clients were not open to reunification, because they suffered from severe sexual and/or psychological abuse at home making a return to this environment inadvisable, and even dangerous.

## What is the Whole Person Approach?

At the Reciprocity Foundation, we have pioneered a different way to work with homeless youth—a methodology we call the “Whole Person” approach. A Whole Person approach involves looking deeply into a young person’s mind, heart and spirit and seeing them as a Whole Person—a person with the desire to realize their full potential, to make a contribution to the world, to be loved and to heal from their past.

As a sector, we have a tendency to compartmentalize barriers—to look at housing problems independent from self-esteem. The Whole Person approach involves holding a broader perspective and willingly making detours into seemingly unrelated aspects of a youth’s life. For example, a youth who is unable to hold down a job may have difficulty trusting adults as a result of an abusive relationship with a parent. A Whole Person practitioner invites youth to “deep dive” into problems and helps them make connections between concrete problems and emotional/spiritual obstacles.

### A Whole Person Intake

When we meet a new client, our intake procedure involves probing seven different aspects of a youth’s well-being including: 1) **Physical health**; 2) **Emotional health**; 3) **Mental health**; 4) **Financial means**; 5) **Educational achievement**; 6) **Employment history** and 7) **Spiritual Well-Being**. In addition to answering basic demographic and psychographic questions, we also probe their openness to change, their capacity to deal with stress and their view of their own self-worth.

A Whole Person approach involves more than a Q&A session—we invite youth to

reflect on their skills, talents, aspirations, emotional health and spiritual values. We ask them, “*What do you long to be?*” These kinds of invite youth to uncover their inner voice and the innate wisdom that stems from the heart. We also invite youth to regularly reflect on how they will make a positive contribution to the world—rather than focusing on the shorter term goal of finding a job or earning money. In this way, we help youth frame the goal of employment in a broader context—one that incorporates self and others.

At the end of the Whole Person intake process, we have a clear picture of each client’s aspirations and the key obstacles they need to overcome. It is imperative to view obstacles not only in concrete terms (i.e. housing, employment) but also from a psycho-spiritual view (i.e. the need to heal from abuse, the fear of failure, the need for a caring friend).

### Program & Service Coordination

A second component to the Whole Person approach is the willingness to either provide **End-to-end Programming** (which can be cost prohibitive for smaller agencies) or to **Coordinate Services** and information amongst local agencies. Most homeless youth lack the confidence to envision and execute a comprehensive change plan. Whole Person practitioners provide that perspective to youth—and counsel youth to learn how to see their lives beyond an immediate crisis or need.

At the Reciprocity Foundation, we’ve found that Service Coordination amongst a handful of trusted agencies can be most helpful to youth. By working closely with 2 or 3 agencies over a longer period of time, youth can develop strong relationships with trusted adults. They can feel

supported—and develop trust that their network will help them overcome daunting personal challenges. These relationships also serve as important milestones on the journey to healing from past abuse or neglect by adults. In addition to supportive relationships with adults, we also help youth develop friendships with like-minded youth in our program and graduates of our program extending their web of healthy relationships.

### **A Longer-term Commitment to Clients**

Funders of homeless youth agencies typically force youth to find employment, housing and/or enroll in school within a short timeframe (usually 6-12 months). At the Reciprocity Foundation, we've learned that most youth aren't able to follow a prescribed timetable for personal growth. Some need only 6 months to "get on their feet" while others need 2-4 years to undergo the kinds of personal growth that enable them to survive independently.

One of the hallmarks of the Whole Person approach is the focus on "Readiness for Change" rather than Prescribed Outcomes. We have learned that pushing youth into employment programs or college before they have developed the necessary maturity can inspire failure, dropouts and lowered self esteem. At the Reciprocity Foundation we ask ourselves, *How can we help our clients develop the readiness to manage the challenges of independence?*

"Readiness" expands the frame beyond meeting program requirements—it asks the youth to develop a clear and strong motivation to undergo a change process. Once a homeless youth is truly ready, they will often exceed the expectations of a program, working at twice the speed and with thrice the success. But Whole Person

practitioners must be willing to work on helping a youth feel ready—a process that could take as long, or longer, than the program itself.

### **Becoming Mindful**

Change is stressful. And each homeless youth must face a disproportionate amount of stress on the road to independence. The cost of failure is high—both psychologically and emotionally. And their fragility inhibits them from quickly "shaking off" a setback. As such, the Whole Person approach involves helping youth to develop a mindfulness practice to help them manage everyday stress, crises and challenge. At the Reciprocity Foundation, we encourage youth to try yoga and meditation—to give them a clear understanding of how a mindfulness practice can help. Then we encourage them to pick a practice that best suits them (e.g. prayer, song, dance).

Once our clients have developed a mindfulness practice, we feel comfortable introducing them to higher-stress opportunities—such as a corporate internship or a competitive academic program. Without mindfulness, most of our clients cannot systematically tackle the barriers that arise on the journey to maturity without resorting to unhealthy patterns of stress relief (e.g. drug use, alcohol, sex) from their past.

### **Higher Expectations**

A Whole Person approach also involves taking a different view of one's clients. Most homeless agencies aim to lift their clients above the poverty level. A Whole Person approach involves aspiring to much more than financial stability—to believing that a young person can learn to start a meaningful career, to live independently, to make a contribution to the world, to

mentor and support others in need, and so on.

At the Reciprocity Foundation, we believe that our clients thrive in our programs because we allow ourselves to see greater possibilities for homeless youth. Our 6-Stage Model (see Table 3) ends with a stage in which youth are financially independent of the shelter system. But in addition, youth at Stage 6 are mentoring other youth, have a strong web of supportive relationships, are able to manage their personal setbacks and have a clear (and evolving) vision of how to make a positive contribution to the world.

Most youth meet all of these expectations—and often exceed our highest expectations. Many youth voluntarily change their diets, live alcohol- and drug-free, become community organizers, loving parents and media activists. When you break the frame that is so often imposed on homeless youth (that says they will only ever be capable of having low wage work and living in subsidized housing), you free youth to pursue a different life. The youth in our program have gone on to graduate from Parsons School of Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), have been nominated for an Emmy award for making a film and have become international AIDS activists. These are only a few examples of what is possible when you help homeless youth set sincere and mature aspirations for themselves.

**Table 3: RECIPROCITY STAGE-BASED MODEL FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**

<b>Stage 1: Initial Assessment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Reciprocity program model</li> <li>• Initial client assessment</li> <li>• Pairing with Reciprocity Staff</li> </ul>

<b>Stage 2: Personal Readiness &amp; Goal Setting</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full intake process</li> <li>• Intensive ind. coaching/counseling</li> <li>• Support services to help clients gain self-confidence, clarity, openness to change</li> <li>• Provide interventions for any supports required (housing, food, medical, legal)</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3: Skill-Building</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend/participate in low-risk career events and trainings</li> <li>• Encourage youth to consistently attend and participate in sessions</li> <li>• Help youth to develop a more professional approach to communicating their goals and building a support network</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4: Formal education and/or Job training</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school/GED completion (via referral to partner agency)</li> <li>• College program selection, enrollment and financial aid support</li> <li>• Participation in work placement and/or internship</li> <li>• Hands-on coaching from Reciprocity staff, instructors and industry professionals</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 5: Work &amp; Sustainable Career Path</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Client finds and sustains work to support life outside a shelter/institutional setting</li> <li>• Gaining independence in many realms (psych/emotional/financial)</li> <li>• Intermittent support from Reciprocity Foundation</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 6: Leadership &amp; Community Service</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness to share their personal story and lessons learned w/ other disconnected youth</li> <li>• Readiness to step into role of community leader, advocate and/or mentor</li> </ul>

## Case Studies

The film INVISIBLE: Diaries of New York's Homeless Youth profiled five youth from our programs. Here are the supportive services and programs that two of those youth received from the Reciprocity Foundation and partner agencies as part of the Whole Person approach.

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### Stage 1

- Whole Person intake
- Intensive Counseling
- Introduction to Yoga

### Stage 2

- Meditation classes
- Acupuncture, Reiki treatments

### Stage 3

- Work placement (including a photo shoot assignment with a leading photographer, production coordinator for an ESSENCE magazine event, etc)

### Stage 4

- Internship at PBS affiliate
- Referral for a job as the manager of a Vegetarian Café/Yoga Studio
- Support transitioning to a vegan diet
- Retreats in upstate New York

### Stage 5 & 6

- Speaking engagements
- Opportunities to mentor other youth

Dorian

### Stage 1

- Whole Person intake
- HIV/Holistic Counseling

### Stage 2

- Meditation classes
- Acupuncture, Reiki treatments
- Basic Media Training
- Mentorship from Media Leaders

### Stage 3

- Work placement at a Digital Magazine

### Stage 4

- Help with procurement of long-term, independent housing
- Retreats in upstate New York
- Hands-on internship creating the Film INVISIBLE

### Stage 5 & 6

- Speaking engagements
- Opportunities to mentor other youth