

2023 Older Youth Retreat

Focus Group Results

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Youth who attended the 2023 Older Youth Retreat were invited to participate in a focus group to share their experiences related to housing services and supports. The questions focused on independent living (IL) services related to housing, skills to prepare youth for living independently, successes and challenges in acquiring and maintaining housing, and what youth feel they need to be successful in living independently (see Appendix for focus group questions). These focus groups were held in person during the retreat, which occurred in August 2023.

All youth were randomly placed into seven color groups upon registration for the retreat. The youth stayed in these groups when participating in the focus groups. Table 1 provides details about the focus group make-up. Although efforts were made to ensure that each group had at least one youth who lived independently at some point so they were able to answer relevant questions, two groups did not have any youth who fully lived on their own.

The notes taken during each focus group were coded and organized into themes that emerged from the data.

Table 1. Focus Group Details

Number of Focus Groups	7
Total Number of Participants	63
Number of Participants per Focus Group	7- 10
Ages of Participants	16-20
Number of Counties Represented	26

Considerations for Interpreting Results

Each focus group was conducted by a unique facilitator and notetaker, resulting in a total of seven facilitators and seven notetakers. Some facilitators utilized a semi-structured format and added questions to adapt to the flow of the discussion and/or the lack of youth participants who lived independently.

The results are based on the notes gathered from the focus group conversation and not from transcripts of the entire discussion. Some notetakers provided more detailed notes and demographic information than others. In some instances, it was unclear whether the response/note was mentioned by one individual or multiple participants. Some notetakers summarized what was said and others listed individual responses.

The results may not represent all older youth receiving independent living services/life skill classes in Pennsylvania due to the small sample size of participants and the focus groups were not conducted until saturation was

reached (i.e., no more new themes emerged). However, the information gathered from the focus groups provide valuable insight into the youths’ experiences related to housing services and supports.

Results

Table 2 includes the overall themes that emerged from the focus group data. The themes are organized according to the questions that were asked, and the most prominent themes are highlighted in yellow (i.e., themes that were supported by three or more groups). These prominent themes may be the most helpful in informing quality improvement efforts related to housing services and supports provided through independent living programs. Supporting details for all themes are provided after Table 2.

Youth shared various supports and services they have received related to housing, either initially or on a continual basis after moving into their own housing. However, some youth strongly expressed a lack of support and needed to conduct their own independent learning related to housing. Additionally, conversations in some focus groups focused primarily on challenges that the youth experienced. The variations in support received and challenges mentioned suggest that the youths’ experiences depended on the county they live in and the IL program provided to them.

Across all focus groups, the most common topics that were discussed involved finances and money management. These areas were expressed as either topics they have learned from IL services/life skills classes, tangible support that was received, a desired need, or a challenge faced when transitioning to their own housing. The heavy focus on finances and money management suggests that youth value these areas and perceive that they are highly important for obtaining and maintaining their own housing. It is important to note that many youth discussed the value in IL services or classes they received related to money management. This suggests that for some counties, there are already support systems in place to help youth develop these skills. Counties that already have support systems established to develop youths’ money management skills may not need to create additional supports, but rather maintain their current programs. Other counties that have not implemented these support systems can look to successful services and classes implemented by neighboring counties to help their youth develop financial literacy and money management skills.

Mental health was another important theme that emerged from various groups. This topic was particularly relevant when youth discussed their transition to living on their own and the challenges they faced. Youth who have not lived on their own yet also shared their anxieties and fears about living on their own. This transition in an older youth’s life is an important milestone they must experience, but it can be a stressful time, given what needs to be considered, planned out, and implemented when moving. For example, youth need to think about finding affordable housing, obtaining a livable wage, furnishing and maintaining their space, building new relationships, and managing the expenses that come with living independently. These stressors may be amplified for youth who feel alone or isolated during their transition to independence. Youth mentioned all of these considerations throughout the focus group discussion, and they are captured in other themes. The connections youth made between moving out on their own and mental health suggest youth could benefit from mental health support services during their transition to independence.

Note: The most prominent themes are highlighted in yellow (i.e., themes that were supported by three or more groups).

Table 2. Themes		
Question Topic	Themes	
Obtaining Their Own Housing	- Money management and financial literacy classes - Financial support services	- How to find housing - How to apply for housing
Maintaining Their Own Housing	- Money management skill development - Financial support services	Cleaning skills for maintaining living spaces

	• Time management • Job and employment services	• Creating a safe living space • Understanding renter responsibilities and lease contracts
Most Important Services/Life Skills They Received	• Money management and financial literacy • Financial support services • Property maintenance and home repairs • Cooking classes and resources	• Planning and time management • How to be a more knowledgeable renter • Car maintenance and insurance resources
Desired Learning and Other Needs	• More money management skills training • More knowledge about finances • Training about necessary pre move-in knowledge and skills • Training about living with a roommate	• More training about maintaining their living space • Training about housing rights and legal elements • Other learning needs • Resource and communication needs
Successes While Living on Their Own	• Supports received ○ Financial support ○ Housing items ○ Encouraging independence ○ Home visits from IL worker ○ IL groups	• Awareness of supports available ○ Training opportunities ○ Financial support available • Other successes
Challenges Faced While Living on Their Own	• Financial challenges • Challenges of living on their own • Challenges of living with a roommate	• Challenges of transitioning to their own housing • Other challenges • Mental health
Transition to Living on Their Own	• Being in care has eased transition • Changes in their living environment	• Mental health

Note: The most prominent themes are highlighted in **yellow** (i.e., themes that were supported by three or more groups).

What have IL services/life skills classes taught you about how to OBTAIN your own housing?

Most youth indicated they received some level of support (either initial or continual support) from IL services/life skills classes related to obtaining housing. Below is a list of the themes that emerged across the focus groups.

Obtaining Their Own Housing

- **Money management and financial literacy classes**
 - The most prominent theme across all groups was the importance of receiving services or life skills classes related to money management. This theme emerged across the majority of the prompts, including when discussing how to obtain housing.
 - Youth discussed the importance of attending life skills classes related to money management and financial literacy. Topics included:
 - Learning about saving money, including how to save money.
 - How much money is needed for deposits?
 - How to budget, check finances, and manage money.
 - Building credit.
- **Financial support services**

- Some youth mentioned important financial support services they received that helped them obtain housing, such as programs that provided financial support through a stipend to help pay rent and/or cover other basic necessities (e.g., food)
- Not all youth had these services available to them. Many expressed a need for these types of services to help obtain housing.

- **How to find housing**

- Youth discussed the importance of receiving services or classes on how to search for and find housing and to learn about housing requirements (e.g., income requirements).
- Some youth were provided services or resources that aided in the search process or listed out housing options. Youth with access to these resources found them to be useful and supportive for identifying housing. Other youth who did not have access to these resources expressed an interest in these types of support and voiced a need for finding affordable housing.

- **Applying for housing**

- Youth discussed the value of receiving services or classes on how to apply for housing, and classes that helped develop their contract literacy skills (e.g., how to read lease contracts).

What have IL services/life skills classes taught you about how to MAINTAIN your own housing? (This could be living alone or with a roommate)

Youth expressed varied levels of support when discussing IL services and life skills classes related to maintaining housing. Below are common themes that emerged across the focus groups.

Maintaining Their Own Housing

- **Money management skill development**

- Youth emphasized the importance of services and classes that helped develop their money management skills. Services and classes that helped them accrue savings in preparation for living independently and/or learn how to save money were seen as valuable. Youth also discussed services/classes related to banking, paying rent, and budgeting.

- **Financial support services**

- Youth who received financial support services (e.g., stipends) found these resources particularly helpful for maintaining their housing.

- **Time management**

- Some youth discussed the importance of developing time management skills, particularly related to remembering to pay bills and rent on time and attending appointments on time.

- **Job and employment services**

- Services related to job training, building resumes, mock interviews, and professional development were voiced as valuable by the youth.
- Youth also appreciated resources that provided information on job requirements for stipends, income requirements for housing, and the importance of income stability for maintaining housing.

- **Cleaning skills for maintaining living spaces**

- Youth discussed services related to developing cleaning skills and learning about the importance of maintaining one's living space for a deposit (i.e., when renting).

- **Creating a safe living space**

- Youth mentioned learning how to create a safe living space, such as creating house rules (if living with roommates), cooking safety, remembering to lock doors, and other home safety tools or kits (e.g., security cameras, carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers, medical kits).

- **Understanding renter responsibilities and lease contracts**

- Youth mentioned the importance of learning renter responsibilities and landlord responsibilities for maintaining their living spaces, as well as services that helped them understand the terms of lease contracts when renting.

What were the most important IL services or life skills you received related to housing?

Across the focus groups, youth expressed varied levels of support when discussing the most important services or skills received related to housing. Some youth expressed receiving support from a variety of programs and services, while others expressed gaps in services. Below are common themes from focus group discussions on the most important services or skills youth felt they received.

Most Important Services/Life Skills They Received

- **Money management and financial literacy**
 - Similar to previous discussion prompts, youth expressed strong positive support for any services, resources, or classes they received related to money management. Common topics included budgeting, banking (writing and cashing checks), and long-term financial planning (e.g., developing savings, investing and retirement).
 - Some youth also discussed the value in attending classes taught about taxes, and other youth expressed an interest/need for having more classes that taught them about taxes.
- **Financial support services**
 - Youth with access to financial support programs found these services to be particularly important. Youth also discussed the value in learning about what financial support programs are available to them (e.g., stipends, food stamps).
- **Property maintenance and home repairs**
 - Youth valued support services that taught them how to maintain their property/living space and do home repairs.
- **Cooking classes and resources**
 - Youth valued services that taught them how to cook and about food safety.
- **Planning and time management**
 - Some youth discussed the importance of services or resources that helped them with setting goals and how to manage their time when living independently.
- **How to be a more knowledgeable renter**
 - Youth valued resources or services that taught them about utility usage, landlord vs renter responsibilities, and how to prepare for a move (e.g., checking if apartments are pet friendly).
- **Car maintenance and insurance resources**
 - Some youth received services that taught them about car maintenance and insurance. Others expressed an interest or need for these types of services.

If you have lived on your own, what is something you wish you would have learned in IL that you didn't know?

The youth shared various topics that they wished they would have learned in IL. The themes that emerged from the needs they mentioned are presented below. Since some groups did not have any youth who have fully lived on their own, the responses to this question include needs from both youth who have lived on their own and anticipated needs of those who have not lived on their own.

Desired Learning and Other Needs

- **More money management skills training**

- Although youth mentioned they received money management skills training from IL (as indicated in the questions above), youth expressed that they need more of this type of training. In particular, the youth desired to learn more about saving; budgeting for utilities, personal care supplies, and household items; tracking their spending; spending on needs vs. wants; how to manage bills; guidance on completing taxes; and guidance on paying rent. The need for more money management skills training was expressed by youth who have and have not fully lived on their own.
- **More knowledge about finances**
 - Youth also wished they had more knowledge about finances, including understanding their credit score and why it is important, learning about the cost of living, understanding a utility bill, learning about appropriate housing repair costs, and learning about a mortgage. This need was expressed by youth who have and have not fully lived on their own.
- **Training about necessary pre move-in knowledge and skills**
 - Youth shared the desire to obtain training about necessary pre move-in knowledge and skills. These areas included learning about appropriate housing costs, the costs of renting vs. owning a home, and how to compare costs for housing; knowing how to evaluate the living space or assess the conditions of the space (for example, taking before pictures, testing outlets, testing the hot water, if there is water damage or leaking pipes); knowing whether the place allows pets and/or comes furnished; knowing how to obtain furniture if needed; learning how to obtain utilities; and understanding the process of moving, including renting a U-Haul truck and completing the paperwork involved. This need was expressed by youth who have and have not fully lived on their own.
- **Training about living with a roommate**
 - Youth mentioned wanting to learn about how to live with a roommate. For example, they expressed a desire to learn how to communicate with their roommate and build a relationship with them. They also mentioned wanting to learn how to distribute the rent. This need was shared by youth who have lived on their own.
- **More training about maintaining their living space**
 - Youth also expressed the need to learn more about maintaining their living space. This need included obtaining cleaning skills training and learning how to perform household maintenance and repairs. This need was shared by youth who have lived on their own.
- **Training about housing rights and legal elements**
 - Youth shared that they wanted to learn about housing rights and legal elements. For example, they wanted to learn about their rights as a renter vs. an owner, understand renter vs. landlord responsibilities, and learn the legal elements of contracts vs. verbal agreements. This need was expressed by youth who have and have not fully lived on their own.
- **Other learning needs**
 - Other areas of need included training related to building a relationship with their landlord, home safety and security, the eviction process, housing perks for particular programs (for example, ROTC), and more usable life skills courses. These needs were shared by youth who have and have not fully lived on their own.
- **Resource and communication needs**
 - Youth in one group mentioned needing more resources for those who are transitioning out of care. Also, youth in another group shared that they felt a lack of respect from IL staff and suggested working towards improving IL staff communication with youth, such as by having monthly check-ins with them. These needs were expressed by youth who have lived on their own.

What support have you received from IL after moving into your own home?

a. What has gone well living on your own?

b. What has been a challenge living on your own?

c. How was the transition to living on your own?

The youth who have moved into their own home discussed the transition, including the support that they received after moving, other successes they experienced while living on their own, and the challenges that they faced. Since some groups did not include any youth who have fully lived on their own, the responses included support actually received and challenges experienced as well as anticipated supports and challenges. Those responses that were projected are noted in the results below.

Successes While Living on Their Own

Supports Received

- **Financial support**
 - When asked what has gone well while living on their own, youth shared the various supports that they have received, including financial support via a housing program that has no rent initially and then low rent costs. Youth also mentioned receiving financial support for a car and clothing.
- **Housing items**
 - Youth were provided housing items via an apartment kit that included supplies such as kitchen appliances and bathroom necessities. Youth who have not lived on their own noted that a peer who has lived independently was provided security cameras and other safety resources from their county.
- **Encouraging independence**
 - A youth mentioned that CYS encouraged them to become independent to prepare them for living on their own.
- **Home visits from IL worker**
 - Youth shared receiving continued support via home visits from their IL worker, in which the IL worker would provide hints on what needed to be done.
- **IL groups**
 - Youth also discussed the support they received within their IL groups. In these groups, they discussed life skills to help prepare them for living on their own.

Awareness of Supports Available

- **Training opportunities**
 - Youth who have not lived on their own yet indicated their awareness of training opportunities related to driving and car maintenance.
- **Financial support available**
 - Youth who have not lived on their own yet mentioned their awareness of financial support provided via stipends for furniture and utilities.

Other Successes

- **Other successes**
 - Youth shared that building independence and cleaning their living space has gone well. They also mentioned that they learned not to procrastinate as they have transitioned to living on their own.

Challenges Faced While Living on Their Own

- **Financial challenges**
 - When asked what a challenge has been while living on their own, youth mentioned multiple financial challenges, including paying the rent on time, receiving their stipends for housing support on time, and managing the many bills that accompany living on their own. Youth who have not lived on their own yet projected financial challenges, such as being able to afford rent, saving money, and budgeting.
- **Challenges of living on their own**
 - Youth mentioned the challenges of learning how to live on their own, such as being self-reliant, exercising time management, and not procrastinating with their chores and tasks for maintaining their living space. Youth who have not lived on their own yet projected having to handle adult responsibilities, including holding themselves accountable.
- **Challenges of living with a roommate**
 - Youth shared challenges of learning to live with a roommate, such as learning boundaries with them and transitioning from one roommate to many roommates. Youth who have not lived on their own yet projected challenges including determining house rules and responsibilities with their roommate.
- **Challenges of transitioning to their own housing**
 - Youth highlighted that the transition itself is challenging, as some youth commented that the transition was/is difficult; they did not feel prepared to move and were unsure about who to ask for help with the transition. There was also a concern about being unsure of how to maintain community connections and support when they move.
- **Other challenges**
 - Youth also mentioned the challenge of learning how to cook. Youth who have not lived on their own yet projected challenges of finding affordable housing and finding a job. They also shared other challenges faced by their peers who have lived on their own, including losing their job, car issues, and crime in their neighborhood.

Transition to Living on Their Own

- **Being in care has eased the transition**
 - When asked about how the transition to living on their own went, youth commented about how being in care has helped ease the transition. They shared that they were forced to grow up fast while in the child welfare system, and moving while in care has made the transition to living at college easier.
- **Changes in their living environment**
 - Youth also commented about the changes in their living environment, including moving from a structured environment to an independent setting. Youth who have not lived on their own yet discussed having to transition from living with others, such as their siblings, to living alone.

Challenges Faced While Living on Their Own & Transition to Living on Their Own

- **Mental health**
 - Mental health was a theme that emerged when youth were asked to share how the transition went and when asked about the challenges they faced. Youth mentioned that they can experience loneliness when they move out on their own. They expressed concerns about access to mental health support and suggested that it is no longer easy to access for some youth when they move out or go to college. Youth who have not lived on their own yet mentioned fears of transitioning, projected experiencing loneliness, discussed potentially having a difficult time feeling motivated to

do anything, and expressed anxiety about being able to take their pet along to college. Youth who knew peers who have lived on their own shared that their peers initially had anxiety about the transition, but they were able to move out and it went well.

Table 1A. Focus Group Questions

Questions	What are we trying to get out of these questions?
1. To get started, let's go around and say your name, age, and what county you are from.	• Warm up and get a sense of who is represented in the group
2. What have IL services/life skills classes taught you about how to obtain your own housing?	• How are youth being informed about housing options and supports available to them?
3. What have IL services/life skills classes taught you about how to maintain your own housing? (This could be living alone or with a roommate)	• We do a good job of finding housing, but many youth can't maintain the housing for various reasons including breaking rules, drug usage, cleanliness, a livable wage earned through employment etc.
4. What were the most important IL services or life skills you received related to housing?	• Create services that meet the needs of youth.
5. If you have lived on your own, what is something you wish you would have learned in IL that you didn't know?	• What are we missing when providing services to youth related to housing?
6. What support have you received from IL after moving into your own home? a. What has gone well living on your own? b. What has been a challenge living on your own? c. How was the transition to living on your own?	• How well are doing supporting youth to maintain living independently.