



EASA Young Adult Leadership Council Recommendations on Supporting the Transition to Independent Housing

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The EASA Young Adult Leadership Council has created the following overview and recommendations for policy makers and state and local program developers, focused on how best to support the experiences of young adults transitioning into independent housing situations. The intent behind this policy brief is to solicit additional feedback from other young adults and experts and to create revised versions to reflect the widest range of experiences and best consensus. The individuals creating these recommendations are all young adults, with input from professionals working with young adults. These young adults shared lessons from their experiences, which include homelessness, moving out from parents' house, college dorm living, and living in independent apartments with and without financial support from parents.

The strongest theme in comparing experiences is that successful independent living requires more than just an apartment. To support a young person in the process of moving into independence requires attention to a range of concerns. Addressing these concerns include creating a gradual approach requiring adult accountability, daily structure and routine, involvement with a social network, financial capacity and work, and medical/psychiatric stability.

All of the participants described a process in which they received episodic short-term support at multiple time points. They described an evolution in maturity in which their perspectives changed from being inwardly focused to a recognition that everyone has to be responsible for him or herself, and that everyone goes through similar experiences of taking on adult responsibility. This realization came about in part due to time limits and rent/performance expectations that were set by those who were providing assistance. This assistance was provided by a range of sources, including parents, extended family, church members and housing programs. The group emphasized the importance of an internal realization that they were going to have to take on adult responsibility. In some cases people needed multiple time periods of assistance, but they all stressed the importance of being held accountable to contribute financially and/or being required to take on adult responsibilities such as higher education.

All of the participants agreed that the optimal living arrangement allows the individual their own space but also involves significant interaction with others. One individual, who had been in an apartment, alone and unsuccessfully, emphasized the importance of regular check-ins, making sure that the location is safe and is central enough to allow the person to meet basic needs such as shopping and public transportation. The participants were unanimous that establishing a daily routine, including evenings and weekends, is essential to successful independent living. Work, community involvement, exercise and self-care activities such as grocery shopping and cooking, and time spent with friends are all important.

Getting a job that will provide for basic needs was unanimously viewed as a major turning point, but the process of getting and maintaining a job is not always easy. It is typical for young people to have multiple living situations and multiple jobs over time, with growing levels of independence. In some cases individuals have experienced relapse when facing a lot of responsibility and stress at once. At times they needed short-term assistance or temporarily returned to live with parents. One person described a cautionary tale of being placed with rent subsidies in an apartment at a young age without significant additional assistance, becoming very isolated, symptomatic and using alcohol and drugs.

All participants in the discussion were unanimous that living arrangements, which afford private space but not isolation, are optimal for this transitional period. Positive relationships with individuals who influence good habits are also important. Substance use has a significant potential impact on stability, and participants described a process of moving away from use as they became more responsible for their own needs.

Mental health treatment and access to health insurance played an important role in the ability to maintain independence as well. In one case a person had to return temporarily to EASA to re-stabilize and transition into ongoing care.

Productivity, including having goals the person is working toward and enough activity and structure were universally viewed as key to successful independent living. The group stressed the importance of access to long-term vocational support and stress management. "It is important to have a distraction, and to know what I will do today." By focusing energy and attention the individual doesn't get lost in his or her own thoughts.

It is important for the person to have supportive environments where the social networks around the person know enough about their unique situation and are tolerant of self-care activities such as long walks. Exercise provides a release and reduces anxiety. Having opportunities for meeting other people is important to building an independent identity. Others play an important role in maintaining and reminding the person of routines, forming a health community structure in which people do things together such as working out and yoga. Another vital part of independence includes getting and keeping a job, preferably one you enjoy.

Where people live together it is important to work out common rules and organized activities. Those who had experienced dorm life appreciated the community, support, and organized activities. "Temperature checks" are important to gauge how people are doing.

What Could be Helpful

The group discussed what might have been more helpful in their transition. They identified the following key areas:

1. They would like a stronger emphasis on looking for and maintaining employment. Once a person finds a job, they may need support if they are having trouble keeping up or are having trouble coping with problems they encounter. They would like to have long-term access to a supported employment specialist to advocate if needed, and perhaps a peer mentor or someone from the Young Adult Council to provide support.

2. The second recommendation is that the structure of any support integrates a grace period, with both freedom and accountability. It can take a long time to get a job and people will need support during this time. However, if others are doing everything for the person it is hard to maintain motivation. A grace period of support was emphasized as extremely helpful to the transition of becoming independent.

3. The third recommendation is to make sure the person has his or her own space. For those who need a higher level of support, the group leaned toward a dormitory style situation with others around and interactive staff who are not controlling. Optimally individuals are living independently with a close friend nearby. It is important to support choice and the development of a sense of ability and pride. It is also important for all members of the household to take responsibility for cooking and household chores. It is important for people living together or supporting each other to communicate and outline expectations.

4. Treatment is an important component in many cases. One person said he wishes he had had more accountability including drug testing when he was younger.

5. Receiving rental subsidies and disability for long-term periods can have negative effects on a young person and their independence. Long-term disability, which is a goal for many programs, discourages citizens from working and earning a living. This goal can ruin career planning and independence for a young adult. It leads to individuals who rely on these long-term aids. As the Young Adult Leadership Council discussed, a grace period is helpful. Supports should be used as a short-term brace for encouraging independence. Receiving rental subsidies can be particularly helpful for a young adult who wants to move out, but aren't currently employed or is employed part time. Having this support for the short-term with a time limit would motivate the young adult to find and keep full time employment quickly, but still have the opportunity with assistance to move towards independence. A support structured in this way leaves less individuals relying on government money and encourages individuals to become independent.