

Evaluation of a Housing Stabilization and Support Program for Transition Age Youth Involved with the Department of Children & Families

FY23 Report

Presented to:

Office of the Child Advocate

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission (UHYC)

HSSP Implementation Team

HSSP Networking Team

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Overview of Housing Stabilization and Support Program

Housing Stabilization and Support Program (HSSP)

- Youth in Department of Children & Families (DCF) custody who opt out or age out of post-18 DCF care and are at risk for homelessness, disrupted education, unemployment, behavioral health challenges, limited resources, and more.
- The COVID-19 pandemic created an imperative for a targeted effort to address the needs of this group.
 - A cross-agency team in Massachusetts has been working to create a better safety net.
- The HSSP Pilot was launched in early 2021 to connect these youth to housing, education, employment, income, and other resources, and to provide on-going support as needed.

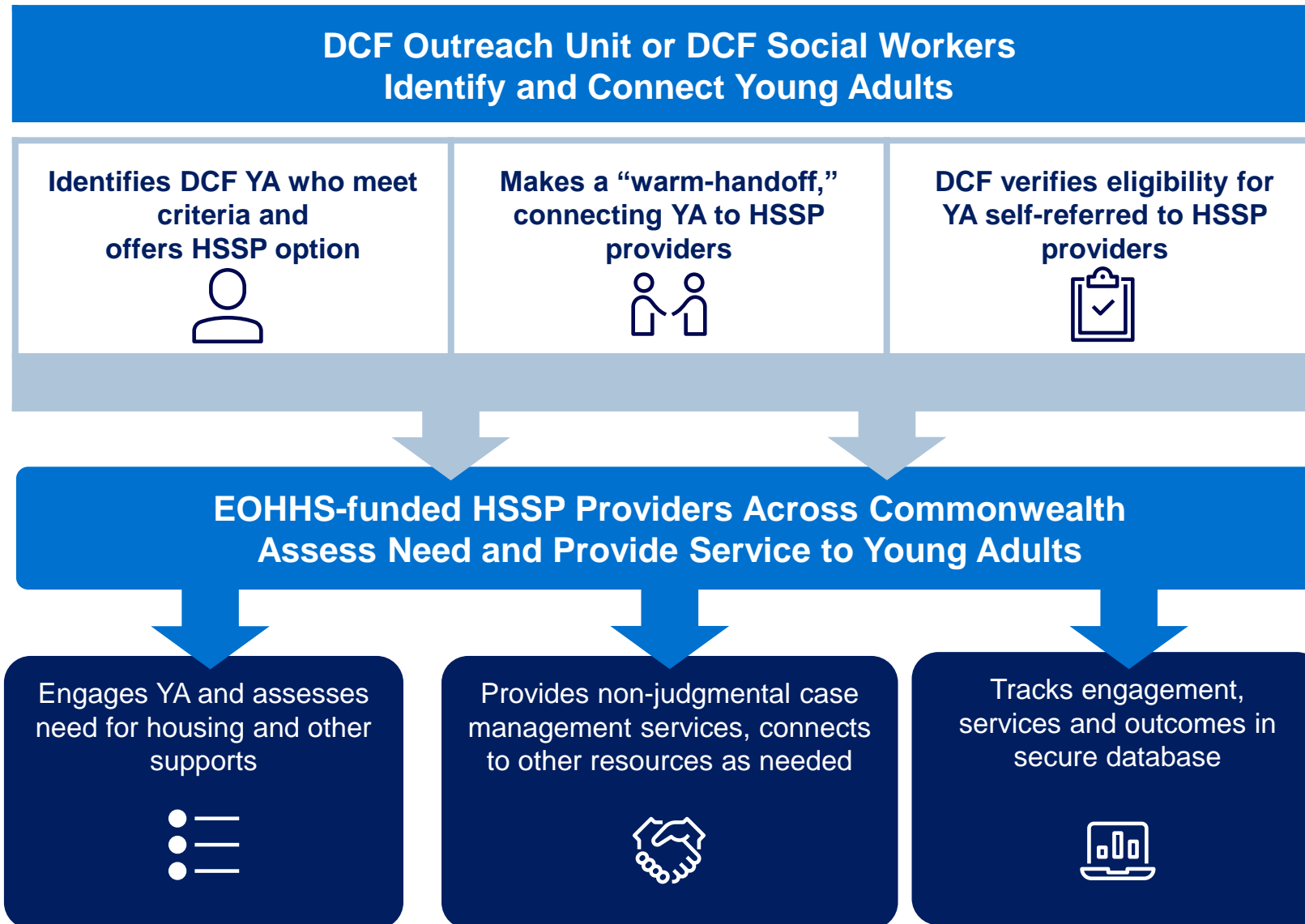
HSSP Eligibility and Expansion

- HSSP is provided by EOHHS-funded community-based organizations via a dedicated Housing Stability Specialist
 - Youth are referred by DCF Outreach Unit or DCF Social Workers
- Eligible Young Adults
 - Youth referred to HSSP by DCF include:
 - Age 17 and over who have opted-out or are unlikely to remain in DCF care
 - DCF-involved youth aged 18 to 22 who continue in DCF care but could benefit from HSSP services
 - DCF-involved youth approaching age 22 who will “age out” of DCF care
 - DCF-involved youth who self-refer or are referred by other organizations and are confirmed eligible by DCF
- HSSP Pilot Phase I
 - Launched in January 2021 with two organizations in Worcester and Springfield targeting youth whose DCF cases were “closed” during pandemic
- HSSP Pilot Phase II
 - Expanded statewide in December 2021 with 11 organizations targeting eligible youth

HSSP Partners

- **MA Office of the Child Advocate**
- **MA Exec Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS)**
 - DCF, DMH, DYS, DDS, DTA and MassHealth
- **Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness**
 - MA Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission
- **ForHealth Consulting at UMass Chan Medical School**
- **HSSP Provider Organizations**
 - Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority
 - Dial/Self Community Services
 - Center for Human Development
 - LUK, Inc.
 - Catholic Social Services
 - Housing Assistance Corporation on Cape Cod
 - Old Colony YMCA
 - Lynn Housing and Neighborhood Development
 - Community Teamwork, Inc.
 - Wayside Youth and Families
 - The Home

HSSP Implementation



Evaluation Methods

Evaluation Methods

Quantitative Methods

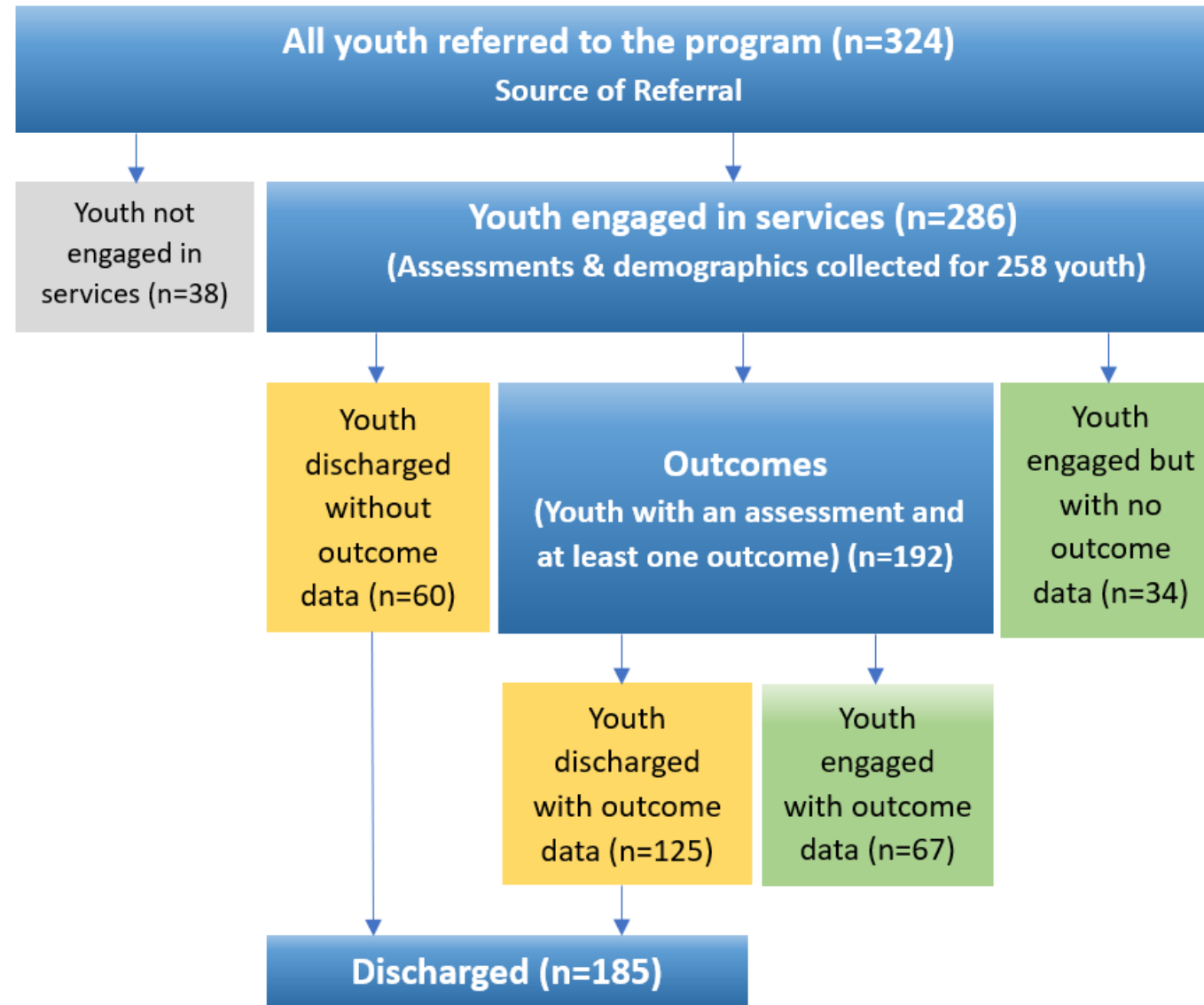
- Developed a secure web-based REDCap Database to track:
 - Characteristics of youth served by HSSP
 - Service engagement, assessed needs, and referrals to other services
 - Youths' quarterly outcomes (living situation, involvement with DCF, education and employment, having a source of income, forms of identification and insurance, and substance use) and reasons for discharge
 - Data entered by HSSP providers; no youth identifying information included
- Provide REDCap training and support to providers
- Generate statistics on HSSP data
- NOTE: this evaluation does not test the causal impact of HSSP

Qualitative Methods

- Conducted interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders
 - Youth receiving services, service providers, state agency staff, and DCF adolescent outreach workers
 - Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded (with permission), transcribed, and thematically analyzed

All methods reviewed and approved by UMass Chan IRB

HSSP REDCap Form Flow



Quantitative Findings

- Referrals & Engagement
- Services Provided
- Youth Outcomes
- Status at Discharge

Youth Referred to and Engaged in HSSP

- 324 youth referred to HSSP from February 2021 to April 2023
 - 80% referred by DCF Social Worker or Adolescent Outreach Unit
 - 20% referred by other entity or self-referred
- 88% of the 324 youth referred to HSSP received services* from an HSSP provider

*Any direct engagement with a youth unless it was for scheduling purposes only. Does not include situations in which an engagement with a youth was attempted but contact was not made.

Characteristics of HSSP Youth

Age

Mean = 20, range 17-28

- 22% age 17-18
- 57% age 19-21
- 21% age 22-24

Gender Identity

- 59% Female
- 39% Male
- 2% Non-binary/other

Sexual Orientation

- 81% Heterosexual
- 15% Gay/bi/pansexual/asexual/queer/questioning
- 4% Not listed

Other Characteristics

- 15% Have a disability
- 23% Parenting, pregnant, expectant father
- 2% Identified as transgender

Race/Ethnicity Using DCF Classifications

Race/Ethnicity	HSSP	DCF
White	37%	37%
Latine	36%	34%
Black	23%	21%
Multi-racial/Other	5%	8%

Primary Language (not mutually exclusive)

- 97% English
- 9% Spanish

Level of Education

- 25% Less than high school
 - 17% for youth older than 19 years
- 53% High school/HiSet/GED
- 22% Technical training/some college

HSSP Provider Engagement with Youth

Engagement with and/or on behalf of youth (n=2,648)

- 2,296 (87%) were exclusively with youth
- 352 (13%) included others, on behalf of youth
- Mean=14 engagements per youth (range=1 to 89; median=7)

Mode of engagement with youth (n=2,648; not mutually exclusive)

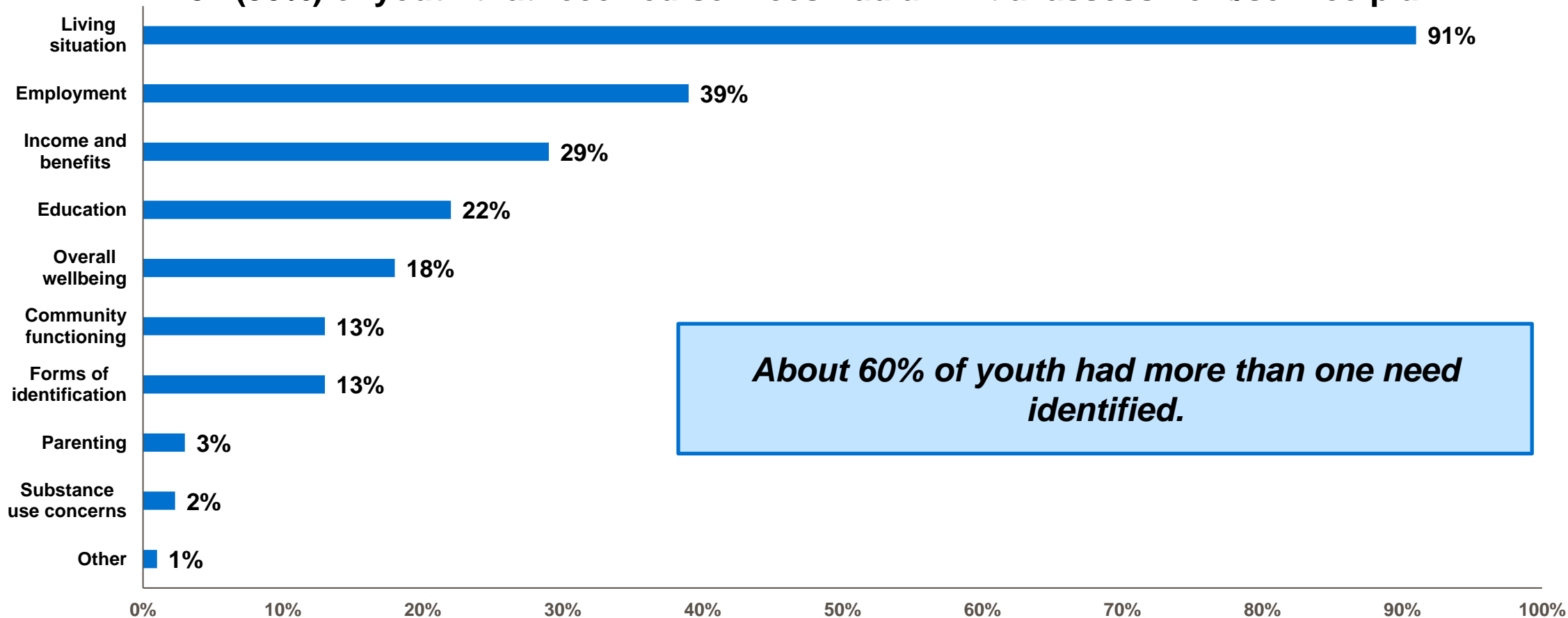
- 69% were remote/virtual
- 18% were in-person
- 21% included the youth *and* others on their behalf

Engagement activities with youth exclusively (n=2,296):

- Regular check-ins (57%)
- Working on service plan (45%)
- Initial outreach (9%)
- Providing flex funds (6%)
- Assessment (5%) and service planning (6%)
- Referrals (6%) and warm hand-offs (1%) to other services
- Providing material items such as furniture and gift cards (4%)

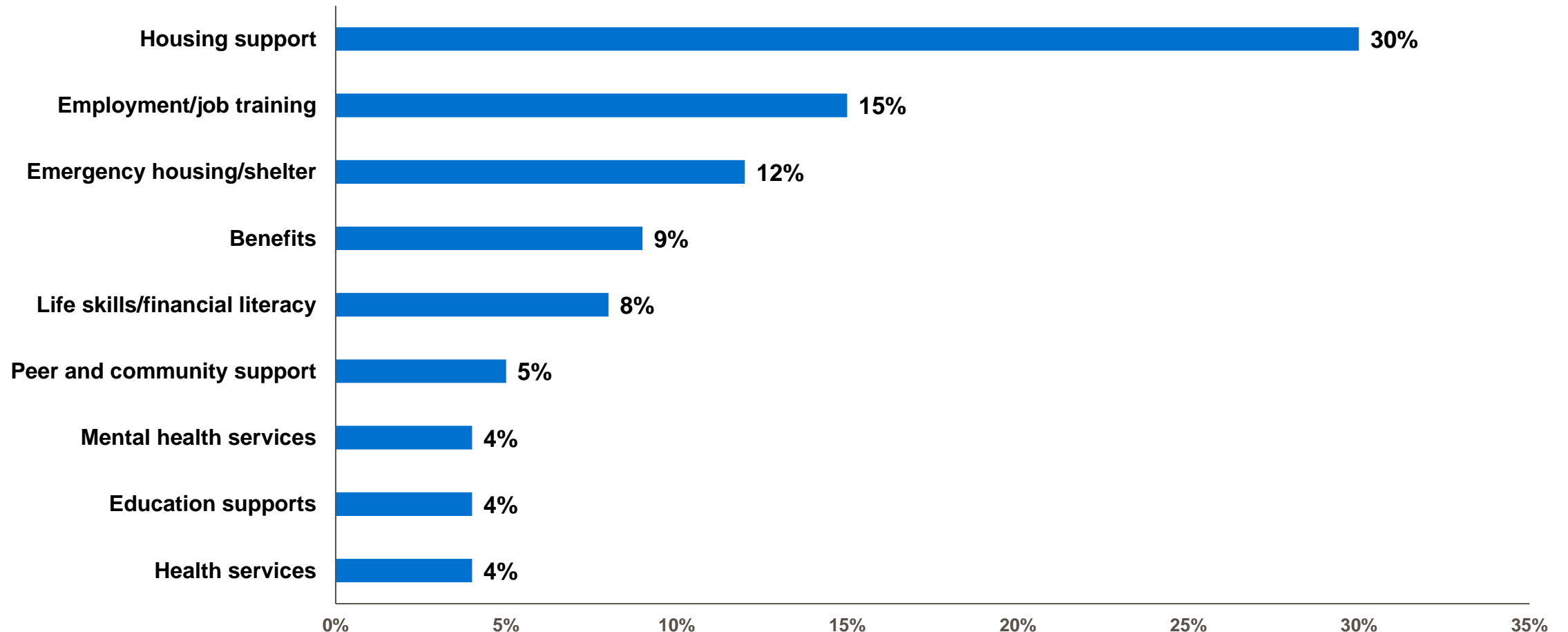
Areas of Need Identified in HSSP Service Plan

252 (90%) of youth that received services had an initial assessment/service plan.



Types of Referrals Made on Behalf of Youth

HSSP providers referred 286 (60%) of the engaged youth to services.



Results of Referrals Made by HSSP Providers

HSSP providers entered information about the outcome of 302 (88%) referrals.

- 58% resulted in youth connecting with and receiving services
 - Most common successful connections were to housing (housing support and emergency housing and shelter services), employment, benefits, life skills, and health and mental health services.
- 15% were “refused” by youth
 - Most common refused referrals were to emergency housing/shelter services
- 10% resulted in youth being “wait-listed”
 - Most common “wait-listed” referrals were to housing supports and services
- 2% resulted in youth being determined not eligible for referred service
- Providers said the outcome was unknown for 14% of the referrals

Quantitative Findings

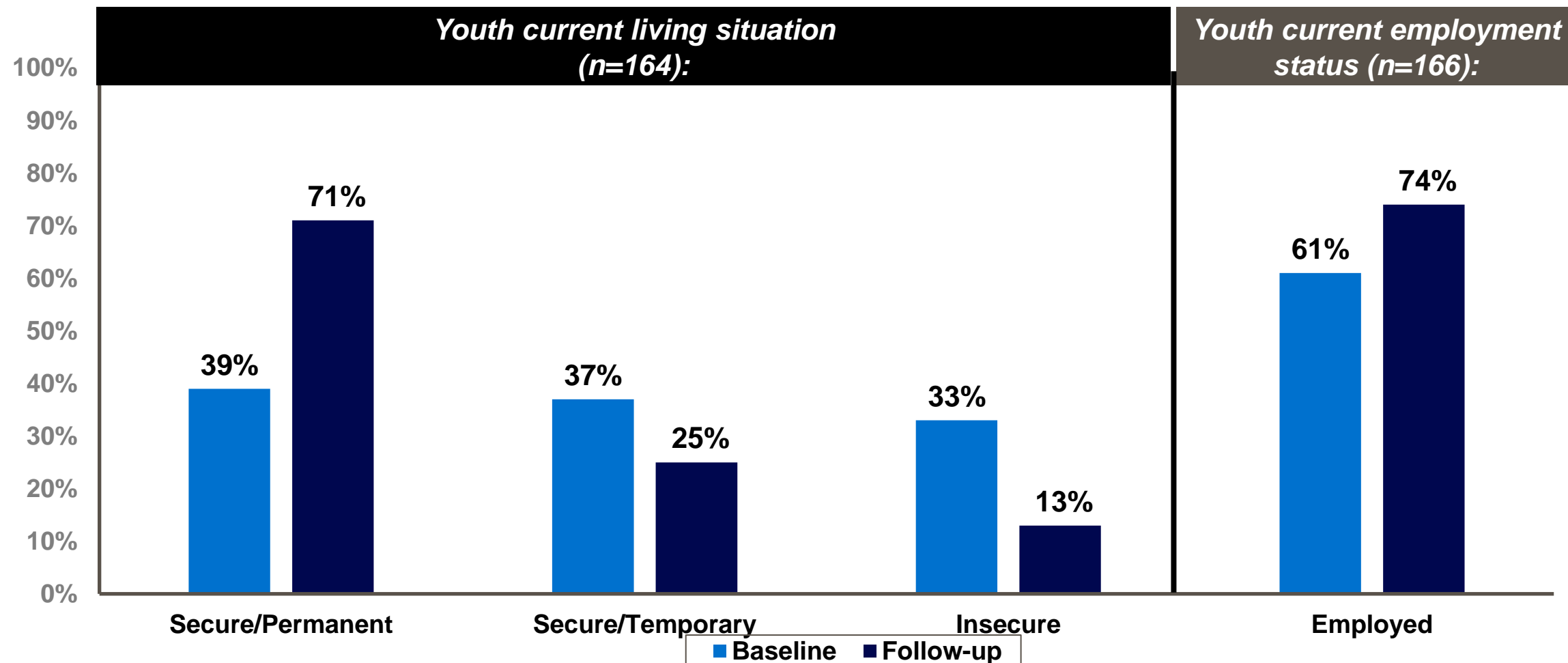
Outcomes Among Youth Served by HSSP: Baseline to Most Recent Quarterly Follow-up

Assessing Outcomes for HSSP Youth

- Used Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test* to statistically test change in youth status from initial assessment to **most recent quarterly follow-up** assessment for the primary outcomes of interest:
 - Housing security
 - Employment
- Conducted descriptive comparison of change in youth status for additional outcomes of interest (living situation, involvement with DCF, education, having a source of income and forms of identification, insurance and substance use)
- As of April 2023, 192 youth have both an initial and at least one quarterly follow-up assessment
 - Some youth leave HSSP before quarterly follow-up data can be collected and others have not completed a quarterly assessment yet

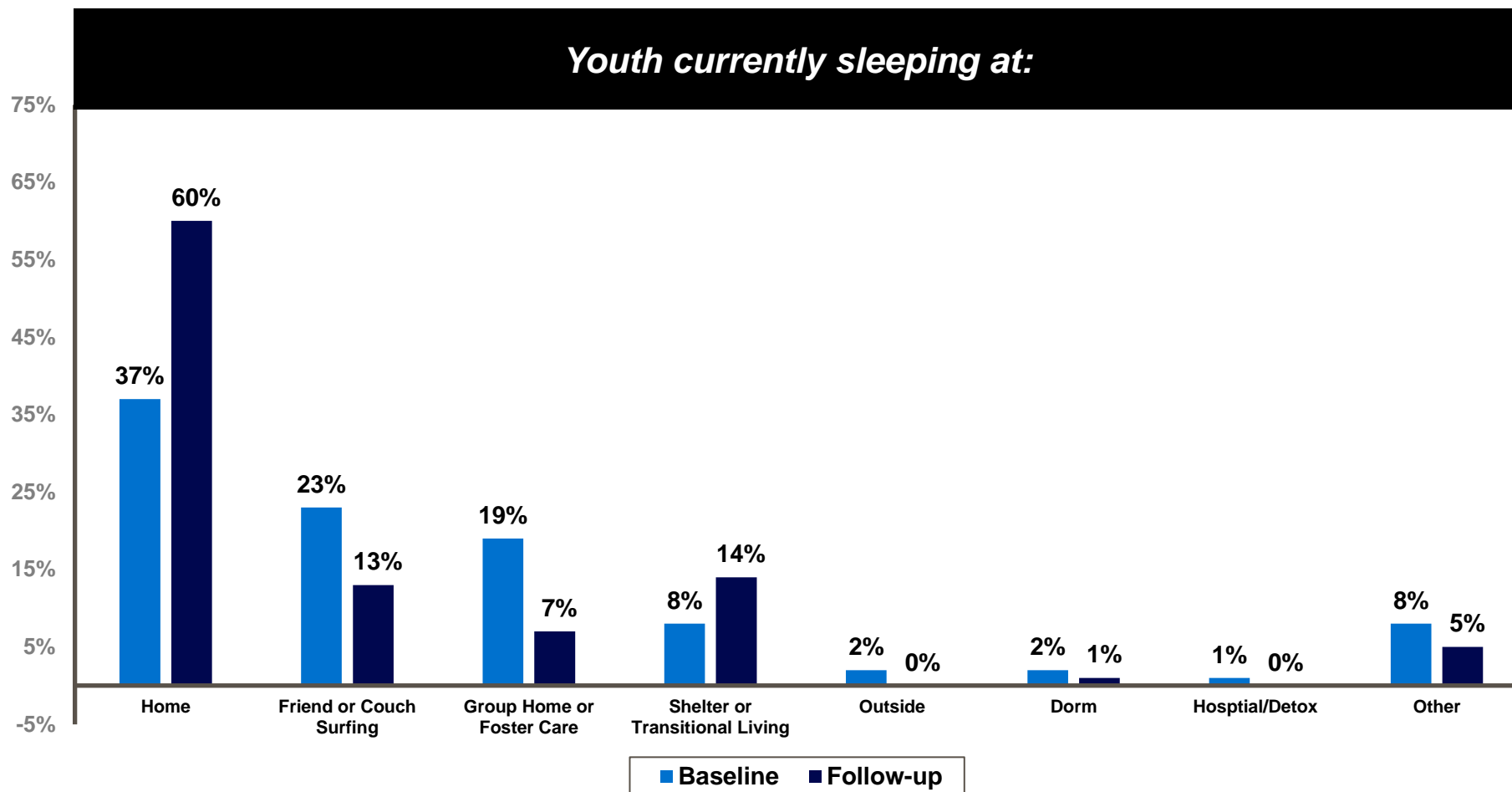
*Remember, this evaluation does not test the causal impact of HSSP

Primary Outcomes: Housing Security & Employment



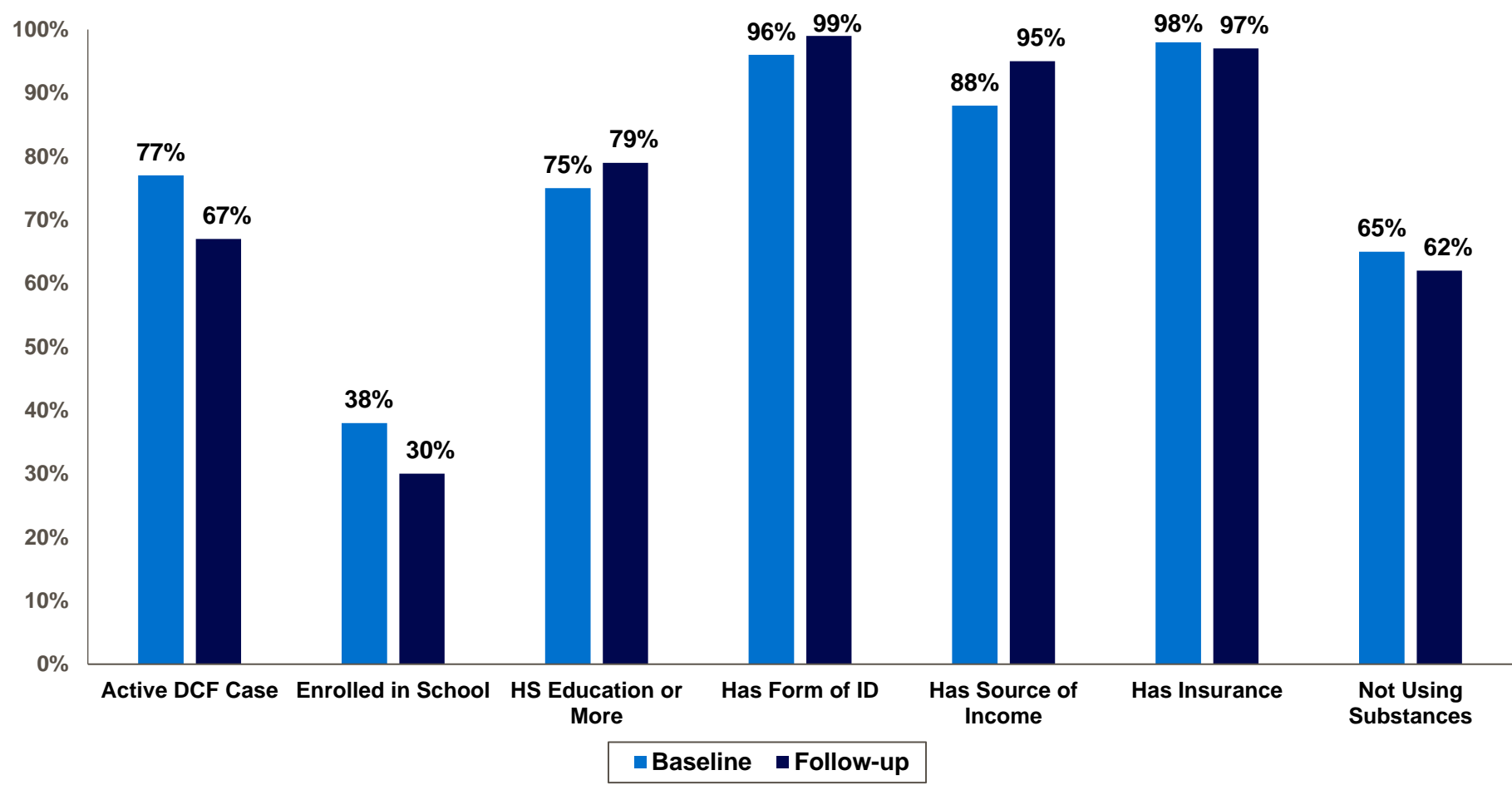
Youth were significantly more likely to have secure housing and employment after participating in HSSP.

Change in Living Situation



At follow-up, 60% of youth were living at home (defined as living in their own apartment, a rented room, or with a family/caregiver) compared to 37% of youth at baseline.

Other Outcomes



67% of youth still have active DCF cases at follow-up.

Reasons for/Status at Discharge from HSSP (n=185)

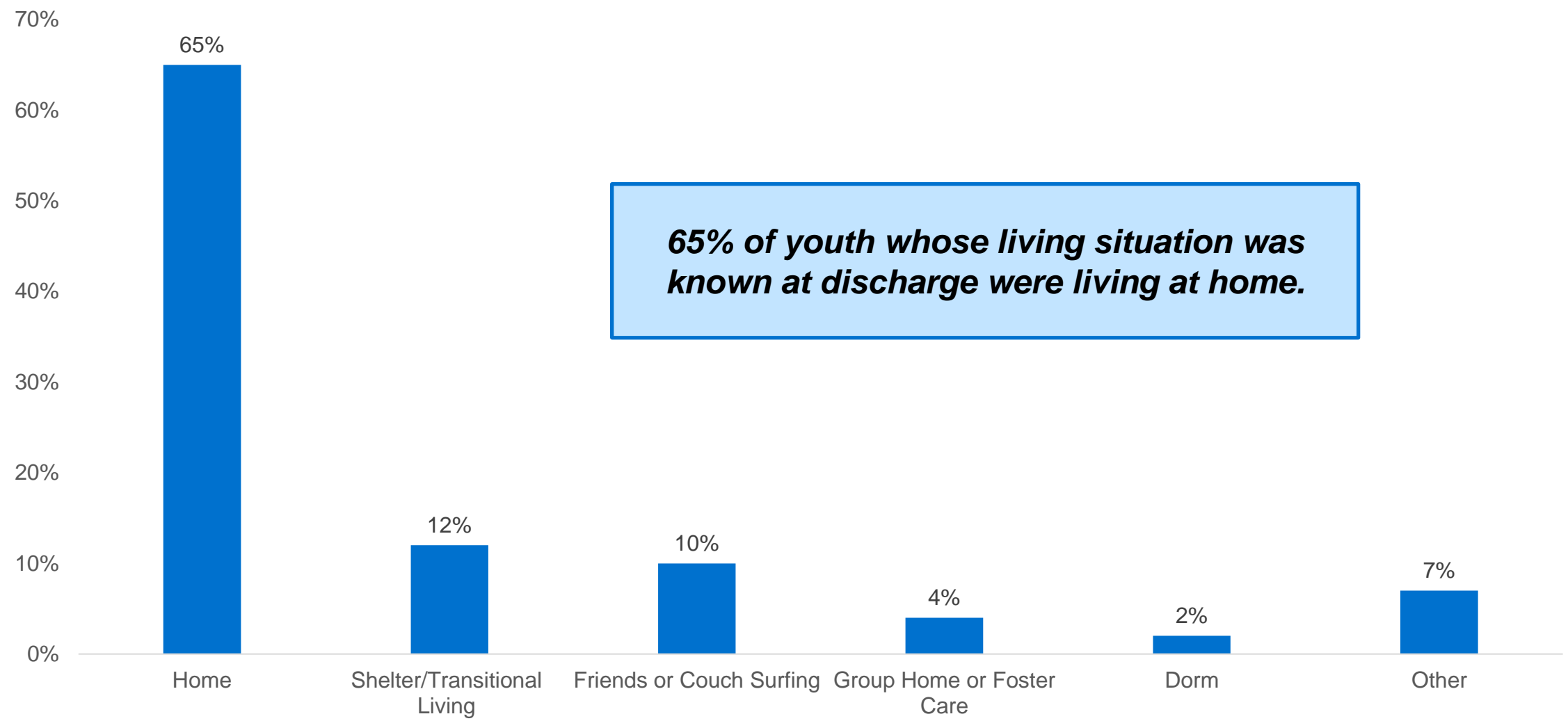
As of April 2023, 185 (65%) youth served by HSSP have been discharged.

Reason for Discharge (n=185)	%
Lost contact	40%
Connected to other services	20%
Declined further service (received at least one service)	13%
Service needs met	17%
Moved	10%
Declined any service (refused services after intake)	9%
Other	2%

Youth has supports needed to do well at discharge* (n=185)	%
Strongly agree	21%
Agree	33%
Not sure	37%
Disagree	8%
Strongly disagree	2%

*HSSP provider rating of youth status at discharge

Living Situation at Discharge (n=105)



Qualitative Findings

- Youth Perspectives
- HSSP Provider Perspectives
- State Agency Leadership Perspectives
- DCF Adolescent Outreach Worker Perspectives

Interviews with HSSP Youth

In 2021, HSSP Youth described:

- Reasons for opting out of DCF care (wanting more freedom, did not want to go to school, bad experiences in group homes) or opting in to DCF care (continued financial support)
- Their service and support needs
 - Housing, employment & income (“can’t get the apartment if you don’t have a job”), educational support, social services (transportation, food stamps, unemployment benefits), independent living skills, health insurance, mental health services
- Their experiences with HSSP
 - Connecting to HSSP is quick and easy
 - Responsive to youth needs
 - Supportive of the transition to adulthood and living independently

“[HSSP] has been **very helpful**...helping me get a handle on, I want to say ‘**adulthood**’.”

Interviews/Focus Group with HSSP Providers

In 2021, HSSP Providers described:

- Housing and independent living skills as critical needs for HSSP youth
- How transition-age youth with DCF involvement are uniquely vulnerable
 - *There is not one person who has not had a mental health issue*
 - *Once they turn 18, they are expected to be self-sufficient but the system they are coming from did not create a road map for them to move into that role*
- The importance of communication and coordination with DCF
 - Generating trust and rapport with the youth
 - Effective transition planning
- The need for both flexibility and stability when engaging with youth

“The more they **push us away** the more we say, ‘we **respect** that you don’t want us around. We are here...when you come back, we open the door with **open arms**. No judgement, no criticism. **At your pace**.’”

Interviews with State Agency Leadership

In 2021, state agency leadership described:

- How HSSP youth “are not super different” from other youth served by DCF, but transition age youth have unique needs
- HSSP as a safety net and valuable resource to complement DCF services
- The need for effective transition planning

“We’re working to make sure young adults have **adequate transition planning**... so if they want [to close], we take a look at **what’s outside system that they still need** for support.”

Focus Group with DCF Adolescent Outreach Workers

In 2023, DCF adolescent outreach workers described:

- Variation in implementation
 - Implementation is very localized; resources for housing varied by region/county/city/town
 - Requires “champion” invested in supporting youth
 - Variation in understanding of services provided by HSSP and referral process
- Redundancy/overlap of transition planning services provided through DCF
 - Particularly for open DCF cases

“Adolescent workers know their communities, so they've already tapped every possible resource before we're going [outside of DCF] for support. So **[the process] was very repetitive** and also the resources were repetitive in that we were kind of being given the same resource over and over.”

Focus Group with DCF Adolescent Outreach Workers

- Positive aspects of HSSP
 - Centralized resource for housing, particularly in communities where there are not a lot of resources or when DCF is not well-connected to housing agencies
 - May not always secure housing, but helping to prevent homelessness by addressing other youth needs (e.g., employment, payments, remain in communities)
 - HSSP helps with:
 - Lease issues
 - Interacting with landlords and attorneys
 - Benefits (e.g., unemployment, SNAP)
 - Applications to housing agencies
 - Providing a resource for youth to continue to get support once they leave DCF care
 - Living costs and furnishings for youth who have housing
 - Learning independent living skills

Focus Group with DCF Adolescent Outreach Workers

- Unique housing challenges for these youth
 - Lack of references, lease co-signers, and money for down payments
 - Youth backgrounds
 - No job or history of employment – HSSP works best for people who have experience or some degree of stability
 - Mental health issues and DYS involvement make it extra challenging for both engagement in HSSP and getting youth past the rental application process
 - Competition for limited housing

“The big barrier is if there's **just not enough places to rent**, there's not enough landlords willing to rent to an 18, 19, 20 year old...**what's more risky, a 19 year old that is working 20 hours a week and has their DCF payments or a 40 year old single woman that's making three times the rent?** And these kids don't have cosigners...We as **DCF cannot cosign** for them. And they don't...have good enough credit to get their own place. Kids that have vouchers, housing vouchers that would be more appealing to landlords. And they're **still struggling** trying to find an apartment with a housing voucher.”

Stakeholder Recommendations

Youth Recommendations

- Gift cards for essentials like underwear and socks
- More hands-on help with getting jobs; help with transportation
- More help with basic living skills
 - *“Something for young adults to learn how to do those basic things like taxes, the census, and voting. Just all stuff you don’t really learn from school.”*
- Contact for support “after hours” – evenings and weekends
- Expand the service
 - *“I don’t know how much money they had to put out...it is a very helpful thing and it’s free of charge. It is an overall blessing...maybe more workers so more people get blessed.”*

Note: these recommendations were made prior to the statewide expansion

HSSP Provider Recommendations

- Enhance the “warm hand-off” with face-to-face introductions to HSSP providers by DCF social workers
- Involve HSSP and other community providers in transition planning before the youth opts out or ages out of DCF care
 - *“DCF needs to help them as young teens. Not always easy to determine who will remain and who will move on...but in any event they deserve to have someone putting things in place for them no matter what their outcome is going to be.”*
- Establish ongoing communication between DCF social worker and HSSP providers so both understand the full range of supports available to youth
 - *“It would be good to know what other things DCF can offer...life skills fund, Young Adult Support payments, discharge payments. Who has Foster Youth to Independence, who has other vouchers. We don’t know about these resources until they come to us.”*

Note: these recommendations were made prior to the statewide expansion

DCF Adolescent Outreach Worker Recommendations

- Uniform services statewide – right now the approach varies by region and what the agency has to offer
 - *“Each office, not even each region, each office operates differently...so it's confusing to us because we're trying to explain this program that's supposed to be utilized to help youth struggling with their living situation or transitioning into independence. But it looks different everywhere, so...we're having a hard time explaining it to people...that we're working with.”*
- Collaboration and coordination with HSSP provider before youth leaves DCF
 - *“When the case closes with DCF, having someone that we could say can continue working with you if you need support around housing, here's someone who can continue working with you over the next months [as you] transition out of our care.”*

Evaluation Summary

Study Limitations

- The design does not include a comparison group, so we are unable to draw conclusions about the causal impact of the HSSP on youth outcomes.
- The data do not enable us to speak about the experiences or outcomes of youth that left HSSP, so the findings only reflect the experiences and outcomes of youth who remained in the program.
- The program data are based on providers' report and could include bias.
- The follow-up timepoint for measuring outcomes varies by each individual and outcomes can vary over time. In future analyses when we have more data to increase statistical power, we could limit analysis to youth that were discharged and their outcomes at discharge.

Summary of Findings

- A high percentage of youth referred to HSSP were connected to and served by HSSP providers – flexible strategies are needed to engage youth
- HSSP connects youth to a range of needed services – referrals to housing support are the most critical and the most common
- HSSP results in positive changes in key domains – housing and employment – for youth served
- Housing status at discharge is not known for more than half of the youth – at discharge, youth were living in their own apartment, in a rented room, or with a family or caregiver

Summary of Findings (cont'd)

- Overall, youth who engaged with HSSP – and that we were able to speak with – were happy with HSSP and described providers as helpful, supportive, and respectful
- HSSP provides an important safety net for DCF-involved youth, with easy access to needed services and supports
- Many youth continue involvement with DCF, primarily for financial support
- Good communication and coordination between HSSP and DCF is essential
- Some potential overlap between DCF transition services and HSSP services

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Thank You