

## Improving Adult Shelters for Young Adults: Collaborative Strategies for Safe Transitions

*“The shelter system is a meat market where the strong prey on the weak and the young  
- but sometimes it’s too cold to be outside and you just have to go in.”*  
- young adult experiencing homelessness, Boston

*“We know that it’s not ideal for youth to stay in adult shelters, but until more options exist,  
if youth go in [to adult shelters], we need to figure out how to make it as safe and as helpful of a  
pass-through to housing as possible.”* -youth service provider

The **MA Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission**, in partnership with **MA Homeless Youth Services**, is committed to making experiences of youth homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Shelters can play a key role in this mission by providing young adults (ages 18-24) with a **safe, supportive, and developmentally appropriate temporary environment** that not only meets their immediate needs but also equips them to **transition to sustainable, permanent housing**. While adult shelters aren't ideal for young adults, they must still offer a secure space and connect them to housing resources quickly.

This guide provides strategies to make adult shelters safer and more housing-focused for young adults, ensuring they move swiftly toward permanent solutions. Shelters are encouraged to collaborate with local youth homelessness services and develop protocols, even if they can't offer every element. **A list of youth service providers can be found at [www.mass.gov/orgs/homeless-youth-services](http://www.mass.gov/orgs/homeless-youth-services)**

### Key Protocols for Supporting Young Adults

- Ensure Safety and Security for Young Adults:** Create separate check-in, eating, and sleeping areas for young adults. Place young adult beds closer to staff areas for added security.
- Staffing and Support for Young Adults:** Assign a staff member to check in with young adults, answer questions, and connect them to youth services or alternative shelters. Ensure staff are trained in trauma-informed care.
- Provide Relevant Youth Resources:** Make sure young adults know about housing resources and local youth programs during intake.
- Connect Youth to Housing Resources Quickly:** Introduce young adults to housing navigators as soon as they arrive. Focus on quickly connecting young adults with housing options through coordinated entry and local providers.
- Provide Transportation:** Help young adults get to youth-specific programs by coordinating transportation
- Monitor Outcomes and Improve Services:** Monitor how young adults are doing in the shelter system to improve services and ensure they move toward permanent housing faster.

## Practical Shelter Accommodations for Young Adults

- Flexible Scheduling:** Allow flexibility in shelter rules to accommodate school or work schedules. Ensure that young adults' educational or employment goals remain a priority.
- Quiet Spaces:** Provide quiet areas for studying or relaxing.
- Peer Support:** Offer peer navigator roles, so young adults can support each other. Also, with consent, introduce young adults to peers for support and connection.
- Pre-Entry Tour:** Invite young adults to tour the shelter before their stay, so they can meet the staff and get comfortable with the environment.
- Staff Support:** Assign a designated staff member to regularly check in on their needs.

## Special Considerations

### Supporting Transgender and Nonbinary Youth

The Massachusetts Trans Political Coalition (MTPC) released a guide updated in 2023 *Shelter for All Genders: Best Practices for Homeless Shelters, Services, and Programs in Massachusetts* with best practices for shelters to better serve transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people.

Key recommendations include:

- Asking all guests for their pronouns
- Offering gender-neutral sleeping areas and bathrooms when possible
- Letting guests choose the sleeping and bathroom options that feel safest
- Having these conversations privately to avoid unwanted attention

These steps help make shelters more inclusive for everyone.

### Support for Victims of Exploitation and Youth with Special Needs

- For young adults who are victims of sexual exploitation, or dealing with mental health or substance use concerns, connect them with specialized services through MA-211.

## Resources

- [www.mass.gov/orgs/ma-unaccompanied-homeless-youth-commission](http://www.mass.gov/orgs/ma-unaccompanied-homeless-youth-commission)
- [www.mass.gov/orgs/homeless-youth-services](http://www.mass.gov/orgs/homeless-youth-services)

For more info or support developing a young adult protocol, contact:

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*This document was developed by the MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied and Homeless Youth in partnership with the MA LGBTQ+ Youth Commission, young adults experiencing homelessness, and youth service providers across Massachusetts.*