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# Executive Summary

## Findings from needs assessment of youth and young adult homelessness in Utah's Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs)

### Project Scope

In Fall 2024, the State of Utah Office of Substance Use and Mental Health (Department of Health and Human Services) contracted with the University of Utah College of Social Work to conduct a needs assessment of youth and young adult homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs) across Utah. The Balance of State CoC covers 11 Local Homeless Councils (Bear River, Carbon-Emery, Davis, Grand, Iron, San Juan, Six County, Tooele, Uintah Basin, Washington, Weber-Morgan), across 25 counties. The Mountainland CoC encompasses one Local Homeless Council (Mountainland) across Utah, Summit, and Wasatch counties.

The primary purpose of this assessment was to evaluate the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in these CoCs and identify existing resources available to meet these needs. Findings from this assessment will inform future directions for resource and program development in these CoCs.

Our team conducted this needs assessment with the goal of answering the following research questions:

1. What are the primary needs of youth

and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs (related to housing, case management, mental health, substance use, social connection, etc.)?

2. What are the existing resources to meet the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs, and what are the gaps?

We conducted a sequential mixed methods needs assessment (beginning with analyzing available secondary data collected by the state, then conducting key informant interviews and focus groups/mapping workshops with youth and service providers) to achieve our objectives.

We used existing **secondary data from the Utah Homelessness Management Information System (UHMIS) and Point in Time (PIT) Count** to:

1. Establish how many (counted) youth and young adults experience homelessness across each CoC; and
2. Identify rates and patterns of existing formal resource use (e.g., drop-in centers, shelters, resource centers).

We collected **original data from 43 interviews and 6 focus groups** (with service providers, youth, and community partners) to:

1. Connect homelessness statistics and resource use rates to perceptions and realities of youth and young adult homelessness;
2. Identify formal and informal resources across each CoC;
3. Characterize experiences of youth and young adult homelessness in and beyond metro areas in Utah;
4. Identify key needs to address youth and young adult homelessness across each geographic area; and
5. Understand youth and young adult experiences and desires related to participation and leadership in each CoC.

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

### Summary of prevalence and patterns among youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- From 2015-2024, 15,995 total youth and young adults were found to have engaged with the Utah Homelessness Management Information System (UHMIS) during the study period; 2,559 from the Mountainland CoC and 5,320 from the Balance of State CoC (the remainder are from Salt Lake CoC)
- Across the CoCs, most youth and young adults first entered the homeless services system through emergency shelter: 72.6% in the Mountainland CoC and 68% in the Balance of State CoC
- Overall, the data suggest that there are short stays for crisis services, moderate stays for prevention and service-based programs, and extended stays in long-term housing, though there are regional

differences in program utilization and service durations.

### Summary of key realities, resources, and needs facing youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

- Rates of youth and young adult homelessness are likely underestimated and underreported due to (a) pervasive cultural stigma associated with identifying as homeless or lacking material resources, and (b) the hidden nature of homelessness (most homelessness in the Mountainland and Balance of State CoCs presents as couch surfing/doubling up and staying in vehicles and/or on public lands out of plain sight).
- Homelessness often co-occurs with, or follows, engagement in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and is overrepresented among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+ (LGBTQ+) youth and young adults and those experiencing mental health and substance use related challenges. There is also a high rate of homelessness that follows exits from residential treatment (congregate care) programs.
- Rising housing costs are a key barrier to accessing affordable housing across the state, but especially in communities where tourism is associated with large wealth gaps and extremely high housing costs.
- Existing formal programs such as Teen Centers, crisis supports, youth shelters – and informal supports like libraries, religious communities, and peers/friends/neighbors – are crucial in supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

## Summary of key recommendations for supporting youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

### For all community members

- Recognize that rural and suburban homelessness among youth and young adults across Utah does exist
- Reduce stigma around homelessness

### For youth and young adult serving programs

- Support youth in transition from child welfare, juvenile justice, and residential treatment programs as homelessness prevention
- Continue to increase local program coordination
- Expand transitional living programs for young adults
- Include youth and young adults in decision-making

### For policymakers

- Sustainably fund teen centers
- Fund transitional living programs for young adults
- Collect state-level data metrics that represent on-the-ground experiences