

Reflecting on YWFC'S

COVID Emergency Housing Program

YOUNG WOMEN'S
FREEDOM CENTER



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About the Young Women's Freedom Center

Founded in 1993, Young Women's Freedom Center (YWFC) is a leadership and advocacy organization led by systems-involved cis and trans young women and girls, trans young men and boys, and gender expansive youth of color who have grown up in poverty, worked in the underground street economy, and have been criminalized by social services such as foster care, welfare, and the mental health systems. By offering safety, sisterhood & siblinghood, economic opportunities, accessible education and healing, we build self-determination, confidence and self-worth. Our sisters and siblings support one another in living self-determined, healthy and fulfilling lives, while building our individual and collective power to change conditions, culture and policy toward decarceration and decriminalization. We believe that those most impacted by cycles of poverty, violence, exploitation, and incarceration are the experts in their own lives and best positioned to identify and lead the change needed to support true and transformative justice.



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Introduction

2020 was a busy year at the Young Women's Freedom Center.

From an unprecedented pandemic to an explosion of involvement in movements against systemic racism across the United States. We were pulled in many directions by the needs of our participants, our communities, and our movements for liberation. We were forced to critically reflect on how we could pivot our programming and advocacy to best support the immediate needs and long-term wellness of system-impacted cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive folks. We found new digital spaces to share support with our participants, and we found funding to keep our communities afloat with their day-to-day needs. We were pushed to jump headfirst into work that we knew was necessary, but we had never before tried to implement ourselves.

YWFC's COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program was one such leap of faith and is a testament to the fact that such bold efforts are often required to produce our movement's greatest successes. *This report is a small window into our experience providing safe and supportive emergency housing differently with our communities during uncertain times.* We hope that the experiences, successes, and challenges shared here will inform and shape how housing providers model their programming to meet the needs of system-impacted cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive community members. As well as inspire housing programs that break from traditional models that replicate system-based logics, which perpetuate harm against our communities.



Context

The vision for the Young Women’s Freedom Center’s COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program emerged from a confluence of circumstances that created the conditions for us to be bold and creative in meeting the immediate needs of our communities during an unprecedented crisis. Collectively and individually, we have, for many years, witnessed the incredible need for accessible housing for our communities amidst the Bay Area’s housing crisis. Since 1993, when YWFC opened its doors as the Street Survival Project in San Francisco, we have been working with young people who have navigated housing instability on a daily basis. Almost all of the staff members working at the YWFC in the early days were houseless and unstably housed. We were young people who had to create our solutions to these problems on our own at very early ages, long before we were legally able to receive public assistance or rent rooms at 18 or 21. We squatted in buildings, lived in SROs (Single Room Occupancy Hotels) in the Tenderloin, shared housing with older partners, traded sex for shelter, navigated homeless youth shelters and group homes, and so much more.

What we knew then is still echoed today. Young people are still navigating these crises in the present day and continue to express a lack of housing options that limit their ability to make choices best for their own lives. The many ways most housing options replicate systems have continued to harm us and created additional barriers for us to feel safe and supported in many housing options. Zero tolerance policies around substance use and rule violations, punitive organizational cultures and, unaccountable staff, dehumanizing savior-based models, women’s shelters that overtly or covertly exclude the participation of trans women and the nearly complete lack of housing options for trans men, programs staff without cultural competency skills or trauma-informed perspectives, and many other factors often intersect to create housing situations that set up our community members for stress, dehumanization, and failure in the scarce number of housing options available in the San Francisco Bay Area.

YWFC wanted to use this deep knowledge and lived experience to one day create a housing program that was fundamentally based on our organizational principles: valuing the expertise and leadership of those most impacted by systems, supporting self-determination, and the transformative power of sisterhood/ siblinghood. Before opening up our housing program during COVID-19, YWFC had been taking housing as a possibility more seriously for the past five years. We conducted many focus groups and interviews with young people and people returning home from prison about housing and met in neighborhoods across San Francisco to talk about displacement, houselessness, and what people needed and wanted.

Through our Freedom Research Institute, we launched our first comprehensive report entitled “A Radical Model for Decriminalization” which was grounded in more than 100 interviews with young people in San Francisco that had experienced incarceration, foster care and life on the streets.

In the course of conducting those interviews, we discovered that housing was one of the most significant needs for our communities and one of the most painful topics of discussion for many.

With the rapid rise of COVID-19 cases and subsequent shelter-in-place measures in the state of California beginning in March 2020, our vision of what safe and supportive housing could look like for our communities took on a new urgency. Most programs and shelters in the Bay Area suspended their intake processes for new residents. We anticipated a rise in releases from the California state prison system and local county jails, and a rise in domestic violence incidents in quarantine. YWFC moved quickly to pivot our work to best support the cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive people who would be disproportionately impacted by these shifts and needed a safe and affirming place to shelter-in-place and receive support to build greater stability in their lives. We met as a team and took all of our best thinking to ideate what housing could be. We pulled from all of our bad experiences, how we had been criminalized, and what we would want to create our model.

Funding such a project proved to be a major challenge. Our initial strategy was to get unrestricted funding to pilot the project in a way that gave us the freedom to implement and build out the program based in large part on the model of other YWFC programming. We thought that once we piloted a successful program, we would circle back with local and state funding sources to show them our impact and to secure longer-term funding. This was at a time when counties across the state, the governor’s office, and state departments were trying to figure out housing solutions for the large population of houseless communities in the Bay Area, which were vulnerable to COVID-19. We approached many local governments and the state of California, but had no success securing housing dollars. We were eventually able to connect with a private funder who was willing to invest unrestricted funds to jump-

start our vision in this critical moment. A second private foundation pitched in, offering additional beds prioritizing survivors of domestic violence. In the process of working with passionate funders, community partners, and a space that was willing to host our vision, YWFC's COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program was born less than two months later.



Vision

The HomeFree COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program emerged as a 90-day program to provide emergency housing during COVID-19 for cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive people, who were unhoused or unsafely housed and system-impacted, formerly incarcerated, and survivors of gender-based and intimate partner violence and exploitation. It was located at a small hotel in San Francisco, outside of the city's downtown area in a neighborhood still accessible by the city's public transit system. Because we intended for the space to be utilized by survivors of domestic violence to feel safe, the program's location was kept confidential, and no visitors were allowed. Each participant had a private room and bathroom in the space and was supplied with a laptop and basic necessities for living well during their stay. Meals were provided twice a day for all residents and in all common spaces of the hotel COVID-19 safety protocols were rigorously enforced to protect the health of all residents. We partnered with local community-based health workers to provide health screening and free COVID-19 testing for all participants.

YWFC worked hard to center the dignity and self-determination of our communities in structuring what our housing program would look like. We were well aware of what had not worked when we or our loved ones or community members had tried to access many transitional housing programs in the past, and this knowledge and set of collective lived experiences helped us define a model for the COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program which stood in contrast to those creating system-based models which encourage punitive-based discipline procedures, surveillance, and imposing what their ideas of "success" looks like for participants. Instead, we drew on our programming experience to create a model which centered the idea that our participants know what safety, success, and self-determination look like in their own lives.

Our program was staffed by YWFC employees with critical consciousness, lived experiences navigating various systems, a deep passion for their communities, and a commitment to the values that would make this work successful. An onsite site manager, two onsite housing support specialists, 4 life coaches, and an intake coordinator built the foundation of our day-to-day staff at the hotel. YWFC staff also acted as liaisons between building security and participants to ensure that any safety or security issues could be easily addressed in a way that did not include law enforcement intervention and rooted our accountability work with participants in transformative justice-based principles. Our program was also substance-free but operated on harm-reduction-based principles. Ultimately these measures combined with our core programming provided the framework for how we engaged in support for our participants.

What is Self-Determination?

Self-determination is one of the four core values of the Young Women's Freedom Center and is central to how we think about all of the leadership development programs we create, the spaces we build, and how we see our greater advocacy work. As cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive folks who have navigated many systems that were not designed without our interests in mind, we know what it is like to be constantly told what our needs are by courts, case managers, school officials, psychiatrists, doctors, and more. So many of these systems also perpetuate discourses that center the idea that many of these people are our saviors who need to swoop in and put us on the 'right' path.

Breaking away from this pattern, we see our participants as leaders and fierce experts on their own lives and needs. YWFC has sought to build models which center such experience-based expertise and wisdom. A commitment to self-determination in our work means breaking away from models which center what systems think our participants need and instead of moving towards a model in which we are always listening to and centering their needs, desires, dreams, and aspirations and partnering with them to figure out how we can support their ability to achieve such things in their lives. Our self-determination coaching model that we offered as a part of our Housing Program is not simply a rebranded way of talking about case management services. It is a new model to return the agency of our participants and allows us to be collaborators and thought partners in supporting them to achieve their own goals.



The life coach, I think that it was also more a way to stay accountable to ourselves. Because that way you're not just setting goals, but you're having someone to actually challenge you, and seeing if you're following through on that. They were willing to do the support, but we were also willing to do the effort. And I think that it came hand in hand.

- PARTICIPANT

Core Programming

The physical structure of the Emergency Housing Program was a small hotel located just outside downtown San Francisco. The building itself consisted of:

- **A front desk staffed by building employees:**
Building staff monitored residents coming and going from the site and provided security for the program. Because YWFC did not control the front desk, we made sure to build a culture of communication with building workers that were in alignment with our values. If security or front desk workers believed that there were any issues with residents, we reinforced that YWFC leadership should be the first point of contact to resolve the issue, rather than interacting with participants directly or involving law enforcement without our knowledge or consent. This positioned us to use transformative justice principles to mediate any conflict among residents and respond to any issues with building staff, rather than risking the participant's safety by relying on systems that were not in alignment with our values.
- **A small office space occupied by housing program staff:**
The Site Director, onsite housing support workers, and visiting life coaches occupied a small room at the housing program. Often this office was the first point of contact with new residents and current residents who needed immediate assistance. This room housed intake information and a space to conduct intakes in a confidential setting, and became a reliable place to interface with staff for most of the day.
- **Common room and open air courtyard:**
Both of these areas at different moments were used to conduct weekly resident meetings in healthy and aligned ways, minimizing COVID-19 risks, as well as different workshops and programming options that were offered onsite upon demand.
- **Laundry room:**
The laundry room included coin-operated washing and drying options for residents. Onsite staff distributed quarters on a weekly basis to residents from the office, and residents organized amongst themselves to fit in everyone's washing and drying time.
- **A 'kitchen/dining area:**
The kitchen and dining areas were used to prepare and distribute meals for participants onsite twice a day. Use of the dining area to eat was restricted due to social distancing measures, and residents who displayed the appropriate

leadership and hygiene skills were trained to lead meal preparation and distribution shifts at the site as a leadership opportunity. Participants in the program who worked during scheduled meal times were allowed keys to the kitchen area to eat when they finished their work shifts.

- Individual rooms:
Individual rooms were one hallmark of our program to differentiate our program from most housing options in the San Francisco Bay Area and included beds, private bathrooms, and microwaves. We believed that residents, especially those who have rarely had a space to call their own, should be able to have privacy and dignity in the program as they worked to achieve their goals. At the same time, participants often left their doors open to chat with their neighbors and onsite staff, and a few even asked for roommates. Through our collective processes, we tried to encourage safe methods of community and relationship-building to break the isolation that came with shelter-in-place orders.

The backbone of our program was consistent engagement between participants and their self-determination coaches. Participants and coaches worked together to draft self-determination plans that identified participants' self-selected goals that they would like to complete during the program. They met twice a week for the remainder of the program unless coaches determined that more or fewer sessions were needed. Self-determination-based coaching is at the heart of YWFC's model and, at the same time, could be an adjustment for participants who are used to engaging in programs with a service-based model. One of the objectives of our program was to help participants build capacity and confidence in their ability to center their self-determination and do the necessary work to meet their goals with the support and encouragement of their coaches.

- Based on participants' stated needs and goals, life coaches could link participants with identified outside supportive services, including but not limited to digital AA/NA meetings, transgender or LGBTQ support groups, and any other services as needed. Many participants already entered the program knowing which resources worked well for them. We always encouraged continued engagement in support systems that participants knew to be a good fit for themselves and did everything we could to ensure they could stay engaged in these services.
- We also helped participants maintain contact with probation and parole in the circumstances where this was necessary. Because of our commitment to a trauma-informed approach and our collective experiences with probation and parole, we knew that we had to create safe ways for probation and parole to be in regular contact, including onsite visits. We were careful to communicate



...I felt welcomed. My needs were met right off the bat, right when I entered it. Because I know how to advocate for myself. So I told staff what I lacked, what I really needed help with. And I'd come down there and I'd be fricking having an anxiety attack, and I had so much support around me, helping me get through it... So it was a lot of support and a lot of help. And I know that going there and meeting the people that I met there helped me stay doing good. Because I'm still involved. I'm still involved with you all, and because of the support that they put around me, and helped me believe in myself, it was just amazing there.

- PARTICIPANT

effectively via notes, direct conversations, and mass text messages with all participants about when onsite visits would occur. This provided participants who could be activated or triggered by seeing the probation officers of other residents in common spaces, the opportunity to stay in their rooms or choose to be off site during these times. In this way, we were able to balance meeting everyone's needs for safety.

- Through our partner, La Casa de las Madres, a domestic violence counselor was assigned to people who wanted this specific support as a way of creating wrap-around support for participants leaving such situations. La Casa's input was also crucial for helping us maintain effective confidentiality practices for our residents and providing referrals to us for residents who might be good fits for the program, and provide an increased number of services for our monolingual Spanish-speaking residents onsite.
- Participants had access to up to two sessions with a counselor weekly. We partnered with vetted counselors with solid experience supporting currently and formerly incarcerated people, people who use substances, and those building skills to cope with trauma to provide the best experiences for participants. The spectrum of support that our counselors provided ranged from weekly sessions to triage to acute crisis de-escalation and interventions for participants, which proved to be vital for participants. A third of our participants regularly engaged with our counselors, and additional residents connected with them during crisis moments. For residents who had already been involved with a therapist or counselor, we did everything in our power to connect them to their current providers via assuring them a laptop and phone so that they could attend virtual visits as well as helping them access rideshares or public transit for any in-person appointments.
- Life coaches, counselors, and the La Casa Community Outreach Coordinator also met weekly for case conferencing and program check-ins to ensure each individual's needs were being met. In this way, counselors and La Casa staff were also able to help troubleshoot and add perspectives to solutions for the needs of participants who were not engaging in counseling services directly but could benefit from additional services to support their mental health and wellness.
- The Site Director conducted weekly resident meetings to give facility and program updates for residents and create space for creative suggestions, community building, and sharing YWFC values with all participants. Weekly meetings became a touchstone for collective decision-making among residents, so they could advocate for what they needed and guide how staff could better support

them. Socially distanced yoga classes, new menu items for daily meals, and the opportunity for participants to take on leadership roles for daily meal distribution were all successful ideas for the program which came from participants during meetings. Meetings were conducted with in-person and virtual options for all residents to best support healthy and safe ways of maintaining shelter-in-place. To support the participation of residents, social distancing protocols were maintained, and mass text messages and in-person reminders were provided. For those with appointments or work schedules which caused them to miss meetings, onsite staff printed up a weekly newsletter on the Friday after meetings detailing any new decisions, policies, announcements, or additional programming and placed it on everyone's door to make sure there was consistent communication with all residents.

- At the 45-day mark, life coaches checked in with participants to develop a transitional plan to work toward successfully transitioning into another housing option by the end of the program. In addition to this, another innovation born from weekly resident meetings was a series of Housing Workshops by the Site Director and other onsite staff, which allowed staff to use their personal histories of navigating housing services in San Francisco to help residents better understand their options and processes as they worked to access other housing options.
- While most self-determination coaches were working remotely, the housing program was staffed with onsite housing support workers to provide additional day-to-day troubleshooting for residents. Shifts were strategically staggered so that the program was staffed with at least one such staff member at all times. Residents would routinely stop by to greet staff, check-in about any immediate issues or needs, and often to have a conversation to break the sometimes monotonous days during the city's shelter-in-place order. Onsite staff offered in-person support for participants while making phone calls, filling out applications, or accompanying them to appointments across the city when they required in-person assistance with these needs.

Agreements, Safety and Accountability

Another way our Housing Program was aligned with the YWFC's values was our approach to accountability for our participants. YWFC has found that so often, housing programs reproduce many of the mechanisms of punishment and surveillance that have negatively affected the lives of our communities and perpetuate continued criminalization of communities of color, LGBTQ communities, and more. Zero-tolerance policies for engaging in substance use of any kind, threats to call the police or probation officers, room inspections, kicking out participants for minor infractions have often made many programs revolving doors for our participants who have already experienced what it is like to be treated as disposable, even by the systems that are supposed to 'help.'

As an organization dedicated to decarceration, abolition, harm-reduction, and transformative justice, we were intentional about how we talked about the program with potential participants. We were clear that the agreements we were asking them to make were about creating a collective culture of safety; knowing that as sisters and siblings, we are choosing to live together in a way that makes space for everyone's safety and dignity. We did not make threats about the consequences of rule-breaking. We did not invoke the idea that the police would be needed to solve issues because we know they do not respect the humanity of our participants.

This intention also informed how we managed conflict and moments when participants did break agreements. We made sure that we made it clear to both the building's security staff and our participants that if any issues came up, that YWFC staff should be the first set of people to contact. We created transformative justice-guided agreements with participants about how to move forward together following any incidents, and listened openly to feedback about how the program could better support their needs. In the few instances of realizing that someone was not a good fit for being able to maintain the collective culture of the space because we were not able to offer the level of support that they needed, we created plans to help participants transition into a living situation that was a better fit. Ultimately, we found that these measures made participants feel safer and more respected and empowered them to do their part in making the program a supportive place for all residents.

Our Participants

At the onset of the COVID Emergency Program, we realized that our model wasn't for everyone but that it would provide a supportive environment to many of our community members. We worked with community-based partners, system partners, and our networks to identify system-involved cis and trans women, trans men, and gender-expansive people who would be a good fit for this, and were currently looking for a housing opportunity due to recent release from prison or jail, domestic and gender-based violence, or who were at risk for street-based violence due to houselessness. It cannot be overstated how crucial our longstanding local partnerships were in identifying participants who would be a good fit for our work. Over the course of our first month of operation, we were able to fill our program and work with the building to secure additional beds.

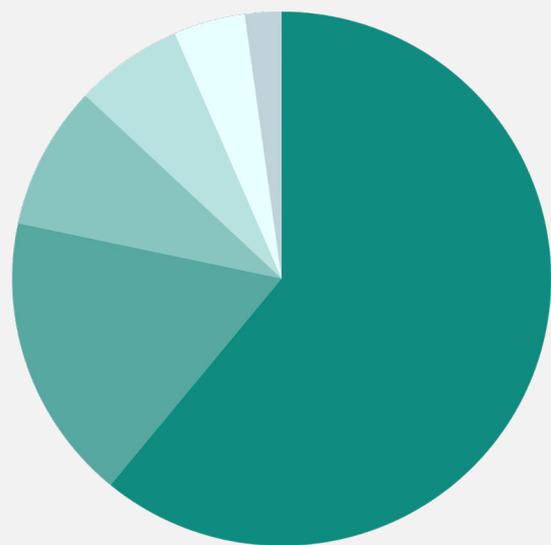
Demographics of our 45 Participants

The age of our participants ranged from 18 to 65. 11.1% were under 20, 33.3% were in their 20s, and 28.9% in their 30s, 13.3% 40s, 6.6% 50s, and 6.6% in their 60s.

Four participants were released for long term prison sentences prior to their participation in our program.

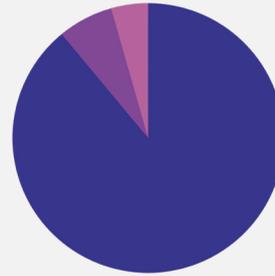
In terms of race and ethnicity,

- **61%** of participants identified as Black
- **17.4%** as non-Black Latinx, Hispanic or Chicax
- **8.7%** as Asian or Pacific Islander
- **6.5%** as White
- **4.3%** as Native American
- **2.2%** as Arab



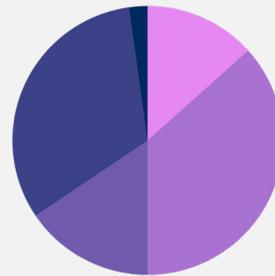
In regard to gender,

- **89%** identified as female
- **6.6%** identified as male
- **4.4%** identified as nonbinary



Of those participants,

- **26.7%** identified as transgender
- **73.3%** as cisgender
- **31.1%** of residents identified as LBQ+
- **64.5%** as straight
- **4.4%** declined to respond



Supporting Transgender and Gender-Expansive Residents

It is important to note that more than a quarter of our program participants were transgender people of color. For system-involved trans women and girls, trans men and boys, and gender-expansive people of all ages, admission into housing programs are incredibly difficult because of a widespread lack of organizational competency around meeting the needs of trans people, even in cities like San Francisco often lauded as LGBT-affirming. Initially, when opening our Housing Program, it was important to YWFC that all staff on site and self-determination coaches working with participants were well-versed and comfortable supporting trans participants through their unique social and medical needs. This meant making sure that the resource referrals we vetted for participants were trans-affirming, that we hired therapists who had experience and comfort working with trans and gender-expansive folks, that we identified trans-inclusive recovery groups and support groups for participants before the launch of the program, and that we had trans folks on staff to support participants about issues that they wanted to discuss with other trans people. We believe that these efforts were successful at creating a space where trans participants could live and be supported in their full dignity.



One Participant's Journey

Maya is a 21-year-old young cis woman of color and single mother who was a participant in our Emergency Housing Program. Through our community organizing network that we have built across California, one of our community organizers met Maya amid a challenging time in her life. Through a number of difficult life circumstances, she had lost custody of her children and was a victim of sex trafficking, which had deeply and negatively affected her mental health and wellbeing.

Our community organizer connected Maya to our Emergency Housing Program staff, and we did an initial screening and conversation about the program to see if she was both a good fit and interested in the kind of program that we were offering. We mutually decided that the confidential location and support we could offer would align with what made sense for her safety and self-determination. We arranged transportation and a plan with Maya to help her leave the situation she had been stuck in and make it to our housing site.

Upon arrival at the program, onsite staff conducted a formal intake process, assigned her a life coach, showed her to her room, helped her get some new clothes, and gave her a cell phone and computer. Maya was noticeably upset in her first few days at the program. She lashed out at a CPS worker on the phone in front of onsite staff and had a panic attack on site within the first few days of the program. She explained that she had been struggling with her recovery from substance use and wanted to do everything she could to regain custody of her children.

Onsite staff and her self-determination coach connected her with virtual NA meetings, which she began to attend to support her sobriety. Our staff worked with Maya to engage in ongoing conversations about what it looked like to have a helpful and healthy relationship with CPS, so she could advocate for herself and be able to meet the requirements to regain custody of her children. Her coach supported her in achieving these goals by connecting her with a community partner certified in anger management courses she needed to complete as a CPS requirement. The onsite staff was able to set aside some common space in the building so she could have occasional approved visits with her children.

Within a few weeks, Maya was meeting all of the goals she had set for herself. She was regularly attending NA, she had completed her Anger Management courses and improved her relationship with her CPS worker. Additionally, she had taken on a leadership opportunity within the program by supporting the distribution of daily meals for other residents. Through another community partner, Maya was able to identify a housing option beyond our Emergency Housing Program that would allow her and her kids to live together once she regained custody. The community member who introduced her to this housing opportunity was a graduate of the program and was able to guide Maya through the application process and obtain her spot within the program.

By the end of our program, Maya smoothly transitioned into this new housing program. She has since regained custody of her children after completing all necessary CPS requirements during our program. Maya applied to be a youth fellow at the Young Women's Freedom Center, where she has become an incredible advocate, group facilitator, and community organizer working to build power for young women like her to transform their own lives, communities, and systems that have impacted their lives.





Well I know that it was a very emergency housing, so I know it was five months. Usually programs last up to 16 months, but I wish it would have been something in that aspect, so we can have at least time to figure out where we were all going to go. Thankfully I was able to connect with another program where they offer housing, so that's where I ended up, which was awesome.

- PARTICIPANT

Challenges

Running an emergency housing program during an unprecedented public health crisis does not come without its obstacles. The Young Women's Freedom Center navigated a number of challenges over the course of the program. The greatest limit to our work was the restrictions on regular in-person group meetings and programming. Because of our commitment to keeping our participants and staff safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to provide opportunities to build sisterhood/ siblinghood as a group which could have deepened the trust and connection between participants who often felt the effects of quarantine isolation in a space that was unfamiliar to them. We did our best to supplement this with continued check-ins from our staff to make sure that we met our participants' needs for emotional and physical wellbeing.

The limit on in-person programming combined with the transitional nature of the housing also created challenges in really being able to help acclimate some residents to the culture of YWFC and how we do the work that we do. Some participants, especially adults who had not been recently released from prison, were acclimated to interacting with service-provision-based models of care. Participants requested accommodations, and the staff provided them. Our model was much more participatory and centered on residents' willingness to make decisions and complete processes for achieving their goals. Onsite staff found that it was harder to get older participants to move out of crisis and survival mode when it came to an understanding of how our work at the housing program functioned. At the same time, younger residents and residents who had been recently released from prison were more willing and able to move into better understanding our framework and methodology in moving forward with the work. We believe that circumstances that would allow for greater in-person community-building work in a program with a longer duration would have allowed older residents to become more comfortable with the frameworks of our program.

Our other biggest challenge, named by both staff and participant feedback, was that a 90-day program was simply not long enough. By the time some participants were able to feel safe and supported enough to do the work of achieving their goals, there was already pressure to find a new place to live after our program ended. This was compounded by the reality that our housing option had a level of autonomy, privacy, and amenities that participants would, for the most part, not be able to find in most other housing options available in the city, making some more reluctant to put effort into leaving. Were we able

to create a year-long program on the same model, our capacity to support our participants would only have grown.

Our final set of challenges came with figuring out the appropriate structures for staffing the program to best support the program model and our participants. The staffing structure initially was quite limited, including a Resident Manager, visiting onsite staff to set up the program, offsite referral coordinator, and two offsite self-determination coaches. We quickly realized that the amount of onsite coordination necessary was far too significant for having only an onsite Resident Manager. We instead brought on a Site Director to formally interface with building staff, parole and probation officers, and partnering organizations, with some coaches more actively working on site. This was eventually expanded to include onsite housing support workers who filled the gaps in support that could not be met due to capacity by the Site Director or offsite self-determination coaches. Having been able to experiment with different models in this period allowed us to clarify what level of support is necessary on a day-to-day basis for an effective housing program based on our values.



Successes

Despite our challenges, the COVID Emergency Housing Program was largely successful according to our own goals and the goals of our participants. We were able to provide housing from May to October 2020 for 45 participants, 93% of whom secured a place to stay after our program. In discussing what factors were most crucial to success for our program with our participants and staff, a set of common themes emerged:

Our focus on self-determination:

Our programming supported participants in achieving their own goals that they set for themselves. We trusted that our participants were the experts about what they needed in order to thrive. Participants said they appreciated the support of our staff in deepening their personal leadership and that programming was centered around their needs rather than us imposing our ideas about what they needed. They appreciated being met where they were in life and choosing how to best move forward with the support of the available resources.

Our staff:

Having onsite staff and life coaches that had shared life experiences with participants, commitment to our principles, critical consciousness, and cultural competency and knowledge to support a broad diversity of participants including trans and gender-expansive communities, survivors of domestic violence, and women recently released from long-term sentences in prison was crucial to participants feeling seen, heard and understood. Programs are frequently only as effective as the investment both participants and staff put into them. Our participants discussed that staff helped them in their goals and truly cared about their wellbeing during a difficult time.

The space:

Housing programs rarely afford the level of personal space that the hotel space allowed us to provide. For survivors of violence and trafficking, houseless young people, women recently released from prison, and trans people, a lack of privacy and a space to call their own is a significant barrier to feeling safe, supported, and able to achieve their goals on their terms. Many participants cited being able to have their room, bathroom, and privacy to focus on themselves as a major factor that enabled them to feel most comfortable in our program and focus on their personal success.



I went to that program and after that found my own place and I started working. I was working in a kitchen now I'm going to my new job on Monday, and it pays more money than minimum wage. Because I been through that. I been through y'all's program, and it helped me out, just to get what I needed to go out. I used it as a step. Because when I was there, all my stuff gone, taking care of business, and handling my stuff. And I used to always connect with you and I'd say, 'Girl, I need help with this.' You'd say, 'Okay, I'll help you.'

- PARTICIPANT

A Long Term Vision

“We have a right to permanent, safe and affordable housing that does not feel like the institutions that have harmed us. We deserve homes where we can rest, be at ease and are safe, can raise our children and build our families. We have a right to be part of deciding our placement within jails, prisons, transitional housing, foster care and/or group homes, including transferring to other facilities or placements.”



- FREEDOM CHARTER

Though our program has ended, we are only beginning our journey toward a world of more safe and supportive housing models. YWFC’s COVID-19 Emergency Housing Program and its success have opened the door to reimagined liberatory possibilities for what both transitional and permanent housing can look like. While our program was temporary, it provided an enduring example of what can be achieved for our communities when our work is centered around their self-determined needs and leadership. We know that the housing models that already exist have failed our families and communities and often recreated systems of harm in their lives, maintaining cycles of personal and generational trauma within our communities. We believe that if a similar program could be operationalized at a similar site permanently and could extend its duration to one year rather than 90 days, that such a model could revolutionize how we understand supportive transitional housing. If we can successfully move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and allow greater access to onsite programming, we would have even greater possibilities.

However, one model of a more liberatory transitional housing space is not a panacea for all of the issues that we face. We are invested in using the information and feedback that we have gathered during our COVID-19 Emergency Housing not only to one day build a more permanent version of this model but to build visions for what a variety of different housing options could look like to meet the needs of our people, including housing specifically for our youth, permanent long-term housing for our communities, informed by what is

most needed at a local level. We also know that any housing efforts must necessarily be paired with efforts to create greater economic opportunities for those who have been systematically denied the ability to access them. YWFC envisions these options as a part of a greater strategy for housing justice in our communities. Programs for rental assistance, homeownership support, eviction protection efforts, and universal basic income models are integral pieces of our long-term vision for ensuring that we are meeting our Freedom2030 goal of safe, permanent, and affordable housing for all.

These visions of a liberatory housing framework are leading YWFC towards conducting a greater study into what resources, training, and investment in staff and programming allow a more comprehensive strategic investment to be feasible and truly succeed in the long term. We are committed to building on our efforts to provide safe and sustainable housing rooted deeply in the wisdom, lived experiences, and self-determination of our communities, to eventually provide more permanent housing programs to meet the needs of our people best. We hope that such a study will yield new blueprints for long-term housing, interventions, and capacity-building opportunities for existing housing programs to better center the dignity of their participants and other critical interventions for our communities in the years to come.





I feel like they should open up more programs, like they was saying, to help more people. Especially in San Francisco area, because it's a lot of homeless, it's a lot of people that need resources, and that's not really getting the resources that they need. So I feel like if they open more programs like this, it will really help out a lot. It will give people more jobs, and it will help people out.

- PARTICIPANT



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