

Kent County has been successful in building a lasting partnership between their youth homeless response system and their local child welfare and foster care system.

THEIR APPROACH INVOLVES

- Formalizing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between their local youth provider and child welfare
- Embedding staff from partner agencies directly at the local youth drop-in center to streamline Coordinated Entry and benefits enrollment
- Focusing on relationship building as the foundation to a strong and lasting partnership
- Fostering a "no ego, no gatekeeping" collaborative culture among local service providers

BACKGROUND

Kent County's Continuum of Care (CoC) covers a "largely suburban" geographic area that includes Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan. Within the county's population of just over 650,000, Grand Rapids serves as the mid-size urban center with nearly 200,000 residents.

The community's recent success in formalizing partnerships with adjacent systems was built on several years of foundational, data-driven work. Kent County joined the Built for Zero network in Spring 2021 and successfully achieved the Quality Data Milestone for Chronic Single Adults in March 2024. Building on that momentum, they participated in the Youth Quality Data Cohort in 2025, which catalyzed their progress to achieve Youth Quality Data in just six months by the end of 2025.

IDENTIFYING THE GAP

Kent County service providers recognized a vulnerability for young people aging out of the child welfare system. They identified a consistent pattern of young people exiting foster care not being connected early enough to housing resources. Providers noticed that young people who had aged out of the system were couch-surfing or actively experiencing homelessness before eventually being connected to their local youth providers AYA Youth Collective and Arbor Circle. Often these youth had either missed the critical window to access transition resources or had complicated relationships with service providers, resulting in them falling through the cracks.

SETTING THE FOUNDATION

Kent County's progress around youth homelessness is rooted in their participation in Round 6 of the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP). Throughout the application process, the community placed a heavy emphasis on establishing a strong Youth Action Board (YAB) and casting the net wide, bringing all relevant stakeholders to the table. Because the community already had a network of providers generally "rowing in the

same direction,” they were able to harness that energy and focus. Kent County attributes their success in integrated youth voice from the very beginning and ensuring that hard conversations took place before determining funding allocation.

The collaborative momentum was the spark for Kent County to navigate the unique partnership landscape across adjacent systems, particularly the child welfare system. While Child Protective Services (CPS) and child welfare remains under the purview of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), the local foster care system is privatized. Foster Care and Independent Living Programs (ILP) are divided across various agencies such as Bethany Christian Services and DA Blodgett. While this resource-based, privatized care model can sometimes create complicated dynamics across agencies, Kent County utilized the YHDP process and its intentional collaboration to actively unite these organizations under a shared, community-wide goal.

BUILDING FORMALIZED PARTNERSHIPS AND EMBEDDING SUPPORT

To bridge the gap between child welfare and the youth homeless response system, Kent County focused on formalizing referral pathways. The community successfully established MOUs with the major child welfare and foster care providers. These agreements clarified roles, expectations, and referral processes. Through these formalized partnerships, the community was able to embed MDHHS staff directly at the local AYA youth drop-in center. See the framework and MOU examples [here](#).

This co-location model streamlined the process for young people. When youth arrive at the drop-in center, they are immediately connected to MDHHS, linked to necessary benefits, and enrolled into Coordinated Entry (CE) to be prioritized for housing. If the drop-in center receives a referral from an outside agency, the youth is automatically scheduled for an appointment to address basic needs, healthcare, and housing all at once.

Street Outreach plays a vital role in extending the Coordinated Entry system beyond formal service locations by actively engaging youth who may not have technology or access to the drop-in center. Outreach staff meet young people where they are at, out in the community, encampments, or in unstable housing situations, and build trusting relationships that often serve as the first point of contact with the homeless response systems. Through these relationships, outreach workers identify youth with current or past child welfare involvement, facilitate warm handoffs to MDHHS and the drop-in center, and ensure immediate connection to Coordinated Entry and other supports. By accompanying youth to appointments, assisting with obtaining vital documentation, and maintaining consistent engagement, street outreach helps reduce barriers to entry and ensures that all young people are integrated into the community's coordinated system of care.

Valuing relationships is at the core of Kent County's success. Before any MOUs were drafted, youth serving agencies invested heavily in building trust across agencies. They engaged directly with staff and youth and worked with their team to create shared ownership over outcomes. Partners were given multiple options of engagement, from referral partnerships to co-location and staffing models. This flexibility allowed agencies to participate in ways that aligned with their capacity.

HOW IT WORKS

1. BUILD TRUST

Invest in partner staff relationships before drafting agreements

2. FORMALIZE

MOUs setting roles, expectations and referral paths

3. CO-LOCATE

MDHHS staff at the AYA youth drop-in center

4. NOTIFY EARLY

Child welfare flags youth 90 days to 6 months before exit

5. FUND THE GAPS

Flexible dollars for fees, documents and move-in costs

PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND EXPANDING HOUSING ACCESS

Because of the strong partnership between the child welfare and youth homeless response system, Kent County has been able to implement several targeted strategies to ensure youth are supported well before they face a housing crisis, while also breaking down the financial barriers to housing access.

Early intervention

Child welfare agencies now notify the housing team at AYA and Arbor Circle early, up to 6 months or 90 days before a youth turns 18 or 21. This proactive communication allows providers to schedule dedicated time with the youth to talk through housing options and begin preparations long before they exit state care. It also gives young people a chance to build trust with providers outside of care, especially if those relationship dynamics are complicated. Young people trust referrals and guidance from AYA and Arbor Circle staff, resulting in fewer young people disconnected from services altogether if they leave care early.

Maximizing FYI vouchers

Kent County has been massively successful in utilizing Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers. The local Public Housing Authority (PHA), the Grand Rapids Housing Commission, is highly engaged and maintains a solid knowledge base of the vouchers available in the community. CE access points know exactly who to send referrals to, ensuring a swift start to the process. This process has been so effective that the PHA has had to send in a request for more vouchers because of the high utilization rate.

Deploying flexible funding

Securing a housing voucher is only the first step. The biggest hurdles for youth are often application fees, securing vital documents, and move-in costs. Organizations like AYA and Arbor Circle utilize flexible funding to cover these expenses, which has proven critical for crossing the finish line to house youth.

A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION: TAKING EGO OUT OF THE WORK

Kent County accredits the major driving force behind their success being the level of investment and dedication from local providers. The community has done intentional work to have hard, but kind conversations with partners and built trust through the YHDP process. Because stakeholders agree on shared mission and goals, system change happens more quickly and with less resistance. At the end of 2025, a group of youth service providers, the CoC, the Youth Action Board and the Kent Intermediate School District, hosted a State of Youth Homelessness event called *We Exist* that brought in numerous stakeholders and reinvigorated the Youth Committee to function as an active, ongoing workgroup.

For other communities looking to connect adjacent systems to their youth homeless response system, Kent County's primary advice is to take the ego, pride, and gatekeeping out of the work. Establishing formalized partnerships wasn't always easy; while some agencies finalized MOUs in a few weeks, others took up to 3 months due to strict state-funded contract requirements. Kent County navigated hurdles around capacity constraints across partners by underlining the main objective: getting young people connected to the resources they need. By fitting this work into partners' existing workflows, the community built a sustainable, deeply connected system to support young people.

TRY THIS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- ☐ Map who currently touches a young person in the 12 months before they exit care, and who does not.
- ☐ Invest in relationships with partner agency staff before drafting any agreement.
- ☐ Offer partners a menu of engagement options (referral, co-location, shared staffing) sized to their capacity.
- ☐ Write the notification trigger into the MOU: how many days before exit, to whom, by what method.
- ☐ Confirm your PHA knows its FYI voucher inventory and who at each access point can refer.
- ☐ Identify a flexible funding source for application fees, documents, and move-in costs before the first voucher lands.
- ☐ Budget up to three months for MOU execution with state-contracted agencies.

LESSONS LEARNED

Start with relationships.	Trust and shared purpose make formal systems change possible.
Move upstream.	Early identification and referral are critical to prevention and quick resolution.
Make it easy to participate.	Flexible partnership models reduce barriers for agencies.
Align around the young person.	Systems work best when they are designed around the needs of the young person.
Leave the ego at the door.	A trustful and collaborative culture accelerates progress.

WHAT'S NEXT

Leaders in Kent County are actively involved in ongoing cross-system development and building on their established foundation. Recently, staff joined the National Prevention Learning Collaborative (NPLC), participating in a 6 month cohort alongside MDHHS and youth with lived experience to specifically focus on preventing homelessness among youth exiting foster care. Future priorities include:

- Deepening partnerships with their local juvenile justice system
- Expanding connections with grassroots and "by and for" organizations
- Strengthening support for youth after they are housed
- Standing up the reinvigorated youth committee to work on collaborative goals and implement other strategies learned from Built for Zero, melding everything together
- Applying an equity lens to better support Black and Brown youth disproportionately represented in the system

GET IN TOUCH

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