



CARES

Creating Actionable & Real Solutions

AN INITIATIVE OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

A COMMUNITY THAT CARES FOR YOUNG ADULTS

*A Youth-Centered Housing
Policy Agenda for Los Angeles*



**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy agenda is a product of a collaboration between young adults who have experienced foster care and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). CARES Ambassadors in Los Angeles worked together with CSSP staff to co-develop policy recommendations that would break down barriers and set all young people up to thrive. The following CSSP staff helped to co-develop the agenda: Shadi Houshyar, Esi Hutchful, Megan Martin, and Alexandra Citrin. The authors are grateful to Michael Santos, RESULTS Educational Fund and the American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness & Poverty for providing thoughtful feedback on this agenda. They are also grateful to their colleague Liz Squibb for her input and suggestions and thank Jessica Pika for the design and layout of this agenda.

This local policy agenda builds on an earlier collaboration between CARES Ambassadors and CSSP, [A Policy Agenda for a Nation that CARES for Young Adults](#). The national policy agenda seeks to advance policy that supports young people in their families and communities, calling for fulfilling jobs that pay a living wage, have predictable hours, and provide workplace protections; housing that is safe, healthy, and stable; health care that is affordable and affirming, and includes supports for managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health needs; and for those who are parenting, affordable and responsive child care.

ABOUT CARES

CARES, Creating Actionable and Real Solutions, aims to drastically change the systemic challenges that youth—specifically older or "transition-age" youth of color—who are or have been involved with the foster care system experience. We believe that, working in tandem with the young people most impacted by the foster care system, we can develop intentional, authentic, and anti-racist policy strategies that dismantle racist systems and begin to develop the policies, community resources, and infrastructure that truly support youth in achieving their goals.

ABOUT CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children, youth, and families thrive. We translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, and support strong and inclusive communities. We advocate with and for all children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. Learn more at www.CSSP.org.



HOUSING

A HOUSING GUARANTEE

For young people, housing is a basic need and essential for a successful transition to adulthood. Safe and stable housing promotes health and wellbeing and supports young people as they pursue education, employment, and other goals.^{1,2} Yet in Los Angeles, an extreme housing shortage has left Angelenos, especially those with the lowest incomes, struggling to afford housing. Young people, who often live paycheck to paycheck with little to no savings, are particularly overburdened by Los Angeles' high housing costs.

Across Los Angeles County, nearly two-thirds of unhoused young people attribute their lack of housing to economic hardship, and in the city, among young Angelenos ages 18 to 25, median rent alone claims 46 percent of their income.^{3,4} While housing assistance is available, these supports are underfunded, limited, and hard to navigate. For example, housing vouchers defray rental costs, but young Angelenos contend with 20 different Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) in the county, years-long waitlists, and limitations on where they can use their vouchers.^{5,6} Having a voucher in hand also does not guarantee housing, as landlords commonly discriminate against voucher holders, and young people often have difficulty finding a suitable rental within the required timeframes.^{7,8} While these problems exist for residents of all ages, young adults are hit hard because they have little to no experience with the housing market and do not know how to navigate a bureaucracy like the housing system. These challenges are particularly acute for young people aging out of foster care and youth of color, leading to high rates of homelessness and housing instability for these young people.^{9,10}

In our conversations with CARES Ambassadors in Los Angeles, they consistently talked about wanting a different and better housing experience. They talked about wanting a place of their own, a place that would always be there, a sanctuary, a safe space where they could focus on life and pursue their goals. One Ambassador who is raising a young child talked about wanting to provide a nurturing, safe, and stable home for him. She described a *“thriving environment that would support my goals and future and allow me to focus on my mental health as a parent—a supportive environment for me as a parent.”* Another Ambassador shared that he hopes for *“somewhere that I can have my own space and feel safe and at peace, and not worry about anything.”* Most of all, they talked about stability and a future where they no longer have to worry about their housing. The following policy agenda reflects CARES Ambassadors' vision for a housing system that supports young people in Los Angeles, as well as their ideas for how to achieve this vision.

A VISION FOR HOUSING IN LOS ANGELES

Young people should have access to safe, stable, affordable, and healthy housing that meets their needs.

POLICY PRIORITIES

01 ENSURE CURRENT HOUSING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES ARE AUGMENTED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

This can be achieved by:

- **Expanding eligibility for housing vouchers and subsidies and reducing barriers for young people who are precariously or unstably housed.** Los Angeles CARES Ambassadors shared that having any form of housing, even if it is precarious housing (e.g., homeless shelter or couch surfing), renders them ineligible for housing vouchers. As a result, it can be difficult for them to access housing vouchers. Ambassadors also shared that they are required to provide a physical mailing address when applying for housing. These requirements are barriers for young people who are precariously or unstably housed and should be eliminated.
- **Maximizing the reach of existing vouchers.** There are four main funding streams that support subsidized housing and provide services for young people exiting foster care.¹¹ While more of these vouchers and rental subsidies are needed to meet the high demand, county officials also need to maximize existing supports, which are underutilized and poorly coordinated. As a report by Genesis LA highlights, officials in the county and state should coordinate to identify opportunities to improve contracting with service providers, increase the value of state subsidies to match the cost of living, and simplify the referral process for vouchers.¹² CARES Ambassadors also shared that there is a need for improved communication about housing vouchers (e.g., types, availability, eligibility, etc.). These efforts would ensure no available resources go unused.
- **Increasing the time limit allowed for securing a lease with a housing voucher.** When Angelenos finally get off the waitlist for a housing voucher, the various PHAs in the county typically allow for 90 to 180 days to find a unit with a landlord that will accept a voucher.¹³ Yet given the housing crisis and a reluctance among landlords to accept vouchers, the average time to secure a lease is 122 days, and for many, more than 180 days.¹⁴ This time limit causes unnecessary stress for many and can make it impossible for a young person to use a voucher they may have waited years to get. Once a young person has obtained a voucher, so long as they remain income-eligible, they should be able to continue their housing search beyond 180 days.
- **Enforcing protections against source of income discrimination for housing voucher holders.** Though there are both city and statewide bans on discriminating against voucher holders, these bans are scarcely enforced and discrimination continues openly. Despite

estimates that 47.5 to 76.4 percent of Los Angeles landlords practice discrimination, less than one percent of complaints in 2021 led to a lawsuit.¹⁵ The city, county, and state should commit to robust enforcement of protections, including investigating areas where discrimination is highest, and pursue litigation. They should also provide public education around source of income discrimination and collaborate with landlords and brokers to increase voucher acceptance.¹⁶

- **Making vouchers more flexible so they can be used seamlessly throughout Los Angeles County.** CARES Ambassadors shared that it can be hard to finding housing because current rules often limit the geographic area where vouchers can be used. There are 20 different PHAs in Los Angeles County, and someone with a voucher issued in one PHA generally has to wait a year before they can use the voucher to rent in another PHA; a person can only transfer their voucher if they obtain approval from the PHAs, amid other administrative burdens.¹⁷ The different housing authorities in Los Angeles County should coordinate and collaborate to ensure that vouchers are easily transferable and portable throughout the county, which would allow young people to choose where they live and remove an unnecessary barrier to educational and employment opportunities throughout the area.
- **Allowing young people to make choices in housing that meets their needs.** Young people should be able to live in safe and thriving neighborhoods with access to public transportation, and community resources like grocery stores, child care, and other essentials. Yet due in part to the limited value of housing vouchers, young people have few housing options and are often priced out of housing in low-poverty and opportunity-rich areas as units in these areas tend to cost more than what vouchers cover.¹⁸ To ensure young people can live in the neighborhoods of their choice, PHAs should set rental subsidies at higher values to be in sync with current fair market rents and to better respond to housing market dynamics. Specifically, rental subsidies within each zip code should be set at higher values that better reflect current housing market conditions so that each LA neighborhood reflects average rental prices for that particular neighborhood. CARES Ambassadors also shared that there are specific requirements around vouchers such as Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus) that limit options for young people; as an example, while there are several housing models under this program, a CARES Ambassador who is a young parent shared that they were required to share a home with another mother and child who were experiencing interpersonal violence. As a result, she and her young son were also exposed to violence and feared for their safety but had no other housing option.

“[I WANT] SOMEWHERE THAT I CAN HAVE MY OWN SPACE AND FEEL SAFE AND AT PEACE, AND NOT WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING.”

— LOS ANGELES CARES AMBASSADOR

02 END THE HARSH CLIFF EFFECT OF CURRENT TIME-LIMITED HOUSING SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE AND BETTER PREPARE THEM FOR THE FUTURE.

This can be achieved by:

- **Designing housing supports so that they do not end abruptly.** Housing vouchers for young people who have experienced foster care are time-limited to three to five years, which creates a sharp cliff when supports end and many young people fall into homelessness or housing insecurity.¹⁹ This time limit is also a disincentive for landlords; many already do not accept vouchers and those who do would prefer the relative stability of housing vouchers for older adults. Vouchers should be available to these young people for a longer period (up to 10 years), and gradually decline in value over time as youth transition to other housing or different vouchers.²⁰
- **Pairing housing supports with resources and transition planning to ensure young people thrive and are prepared for success.** CARES Ambassadors emphasized the need—as vouchers are gradually reduced over time—to ensure young people are building savings, preparing for the future, and have a plan for securing stable housing. They specifically stressed the importance of building savings during this period. As they explained, young people should not be penalized for saving for the future; rather, savings should be rewarded or incentivized in some way. Young people should also be supported in pursuing their educational and employment goals and building foundational life skills during this time.

03 REMOVE BARRIERS THAT EXCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ACCESSING QUALITY HOUSING AND THOSE THAT EXPLOIT YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LOWER INCOMES.

This can be achieved by:

- **Expanding eligibility for rental assistance to cover young people with low incomes who are not income-eligible.** Due to income restrictions, some young people earn more than the income limit to qualify for housing assistance, even though they still struggle to afford unsubsidized housing in the private market. These restrictions also mean that those with vouchers who earn incomes just under the threshold and who are up for a salary increase must choose whether to forego either their housing or a needed raise, which can cause unnecessary stress and undermine their well-being, especially as income may continue to fluctuate. For youth who have vouchers and see income increases that place them above the eligibility

threshold, housing programs should allow them to phase out of assistance if the young person maintains the elevated income over the course of at least two years or more. This phase out would give young people time to grow their savings and prepare for and find suitable housing without rental assistance.

- **Supporting young people with lower incomes with burdensome financial costs associated with renting.** When young people are just starting out in their careers, especially those without family resources, it can be hard to afford not just rent, but also upfront costs including application fees, credit checks, emotional support animal and other pet fees, prohibitively high security deposits, and storage costs. These additional costs are not automatically covered by rental assistance and should be waived for young people.²¹
- **Providing flexibility, identifying, and braiding additional subsidies to fill gaps between rental prices and vouchers.** Housing voucher price caps do not reflect the reality of the rental market and can keep young people from leasing units that are otherwise suitable. For example, if a young person with a voucher for a one-bedroom finds a studio that is priced as a one-bedroom, their portion of the rent will be calculated according to the lower payment standards for a studio. Consequently, they may not be able to rent the unit, even if it otherwise meets their needs and is what they want. Housing authorities should provide additional subsidies to fill gaps between rental prices and vouchers and consider creating flexibility in requirements imposed on vouchers (i.e., price caps for vouchers for studios v. one-bedroom rentals).

04 ENSURE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE FOSTER CARE HAVE HOUSING SUPPORTS THAT ADDRESS THEIR NEEDS.

This can be achieved by:

- **Creating a program to address existing gaps in housing needs for young people pursuing higher education.** Young people who are pursuing higher education need stable housing during the academic year, school breaks, and over the summer. While foster youth qualify for priority access to dorms or other on-campus housing in California's universities, are entitled to move into the housing that is open for the most time during the year and can remain in housing over breaks (in schools that have student housing over breaks), CARES Ambassadors shared that they continue to face challenges in meeting their housing needs while pursuing higher education. For example, existing housing supports are often not available during summer or year round, may have associated costs, are contingent on availability of housing on campus and during breaks, may not be available off-campus, or include housing options for students with children and/or partners, and are not guaranteed for all years of schooling.^{22,23} A scan of housing options also shows that few community colleges offer housing on campus or housing options during school breaks.²⁴ This program should address any existing gaps by providing

year-round housing (including during summer breaks and at no charge) at any university or college in the state, flexibility to pay for housing on or off campus, provide housing options for students with children and/or partners, and guarantee stable housing across all years of higher education.

- **Connecting young people who are transitioning out of foster care with housing navigators at least six months before exiting foster care.** Youth transitioning from foster care need navigators who can help them navigate housing in Los Angeles. California already requires youth aging out of care to be provided with a 90-day transition plan, but young people should be supported in starting their housing journey earlier, at least six months before leaving care. As part of this process, navigators should help young people set housing goals, discuss various housing programs and supports available to them, identify what they need to successfully move into a housing program or the private market, and assist them in gathering any documents required to apply for housing. Additionally, navigators should ensure young people are referred for foster youth-specific vouchers if needed and desired (and follow-up to make sure they receive vouchers).²⁵
- **Expanding and developing more housing to meet the needs of young people.** There is a need to expand the supply of healthy, permanent, and affordable housing that withstands the forces of gentrification and displacement to ensure better outcomes for young people. This can be done by both preserving the subsidized housing in gentrifying neighborhoods and creating more affordable and healthy low-income homes in these neighborhoods through new construction and acquisition.

05 ENSURE SYSTEMS AND PROGRAMS ARE ACCOUNTABLE FOR MEETING THE HOUSING NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

This can be achieved by:

- **Creating mechanisms for young people to provide feedback on the quality of services they are receiving and if they meet their needs.** The systems serving young people are rarely accountable to them and youth have limited chances to provide feedback on services. CARES Ambassadors call for mechanisms such as a Youth Advisory and Oversight Board or a Youth Ombudsperson across all systems serving young people, including housing. These mechanisms should allow for a review of randomly selected cases on an ongoing basis, independent reviews, and the authority to seek resolution to outstanding problems.
- **Ensuring programs are creating feedback loops to share back with young people how their input is shaping policy, programs, and services.** When young people provide feedback about their experiences with programs and services, they should hear how their input is used. Agencies should create processes for regularly sharing back with young people—in public forums and other settings—how the information they share is informing housing policy, programs, and services.

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- ⁹ Over a 3-year period, 684 to 1,368 young people who have aged out of care experience homelessness <https://genes isla.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Scaling-Housing-to-End-the-Foster-Care-to-Homelessness-Pipeline-DIGITAL.pdf>
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