

Riverport Landings Scholar House – From Foster Care to College Degree

Kentucky Housing Corporation

Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

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Background and Issue: Helping Former Foster Youth Achieve Housing Stability

Each year, in Kentucky, some 500-600 youth emancipate from the foster care system. This means that they become independent at age 18, instead of being reunified with their biological family or being adopted by another family as a minor. While in the foster care system, these youth work to develop skills for life as an adult. Although these young people have the option to request reinstatement of their commitment to the foster care program and continue receiving support, only a small percentage do. As a result, many go into adulthood unprepared for independent living, and some experience homelessness one or more times while trying to achieve stability.

Providing housing for youth recently emancipated from foster care presents a challenging proposition. Many factors in the lives of these young people make it extremely difficult for them to achieve housing stability. Research shows that between 31 percent and 46 percent of youth who exited foster care experienced homelessness at least once by the age of 26, compared to only 4 percent of general population of youth between 18 and 26¹. These youth have often experienced traumatic adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in their homes, such as domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, substance use, poverty, mental health challenges, and criminal behavior. ACEs are associated with greater mental health and physical health problems in adulthood, factors that contribute to a high rate of housing instability for youth emancipating from foster care. Research has found that homelessness can be directly associated with ACEs².

Innovative Solutions: Partnering to Serve

In response to the needs of this vulnerable population of young people, Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC) has partnered with different agencies to serve these youth. For example, KHC administers the Chafee Room and Board program under contract with the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services to provide transitional rental assistance for youth who emancipate from foster care. However, these limited resources can serve only a small portion of youth who exit foster care each year. Therefore, KHC has looked at other opportunities to help provide holistic housing solutions to help this population.

KHC has developed a very successful program that has been adapted to provide housing and self-sufficiency for young people. For many years, the Scholar House model has provided four years of housing assistance for individuals with low incomes working to obtain a college degree and move beyond public assistance. Because many Scholar House participants are single parents, the program design includes child care to eliminate that substantial barrier to attending college. The program also makes health care, life-skills training, and numerous other services readily accessible to these individuals and families.

¹Dworsky, Amy, Napolitano, Laura and Courtney, Mark. "Homelessness During the Transition From Foster Care to Adulthood." American Journal of Public Health. 2013, Vol. 103, Supplement 2.

²Roos, Leslie, Mota, Natalie, Afifi, Tracie, Katz, Laurence, Distasio, Jino, and Sareen, Jitender. "Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Homelessness and the Impact of Axis I and II Disorders." American Journal of Public Health. December 2013, Vol. 103, Supplement 2. Published online December 2013.

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One such program, Family Scholar House in Louisville, has sought to end the cycle of poverty and transform their community by empowering families and youth to succeed in education and achieve life-long self-sufficiency. Family Scholar House has experienced tremendous success for its graduates and has continued to expand into several areas of Louisville over the years to serve more individuals seeking a college degree. As of June 2017, Family Scholar House had provided programs and services for 504 low-income, single parents with 825 children. In addition to current residents, there are 849 families with 1,251 children receiving services while waiting for available housing.

For many youth who emancipate from foster care, however, their personal challenges seem too great to consider pursuing a college education. One widely publicized statistic indicates that only about three percent of former foster youth go on to earn a college degree. Many youth may have aged out of the foster care system before obtaining a high school diploma and are inadequately prepared to begin college courses. They must first complete a general education development (GED) program. Those who earn their GED require substantial support and greater flexibility in a post-secondary education program.

Innovative Expansion of Successful Model

The newly developed Riverport Landings Family Scholar House represents an innovative expansion of the Family Scholar House program in response to the unique needs of young people emancipating from foster care. This facility offers a specially designed program to help former foster youth complete higher education and/or employment training beyond high school.

Riverport Landings is a joint venture between Marian Development and LDG Development—two of the nation’s largest developers of affordable housing. Combined, the companies have provided more than 9,000 affordable housing units for seniors, students, and families in various cities across the country. Riverport Landings includes three types of affordable housing developments: Riverport Senior Living—a 108-unit senior property; Riverport Family Apartments—a 240-unit affordable family property; and Riverport Family Scholar House and Educational Services Center—a 64-unit community for low income, single-parent families and young adult foster alumni enrolled in Family Scholar House’s educational program. The development also includes a community park, retail space and other amenities that residents from all three properties will be able to access.

Riverport Landings Family Scholar House and Educational Services Center adds 64 new apartments to the 215 that are already available at the four other Louisville campuses operated by Family Scholar House. Half of the apartments will serve as the first housing operated by Family Scholar House designated specifically for young adults who have exited from foster care and want to pursue post-secondary education in Family Scholar House’s structured environment. The other half will serve families traditionally enrolled in Family Scholar House programs. The program serves young adult foster alumni and single-parent families enrolled in the Family Scholar House educational program with income levels at or below 50 percent of area median income.

In addition to housing, the Riverport Scholar House campus will include a Family Scholar House educational services center that will serve not only residential families, but also neighbors and residents from the other components of the development. This design will help achieve greater integration for recently emancipated foster youth and will afford them opportunities to develop crucial natural

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supports within the community that will help ensure their long-term success. The educational services center provides space for program staff to provide counseling, academic coaching, and workshops for participants and community members and includes a technology center, art studio, a children’s creative play space, tutoring rooms, community meeting rooms, a clothes closet, and food pantry. There are no fees charged to the residents for these services.

KHC provided major financial support for the development of this project. KHC supported RedStone tax-exempt bonds for construction and permanent loans. These bonds were coupled with four-percent Low Income Housing Tax Credits, through which PNC Real Estate provided equity. KHC also awarded HOME Investment Partnerships Program and state Affordable Housing Trust Fund dollars. The City of Louisville also allocated HOME funding. Louisville Metro Housing Authority issued project-based Housing Choice Vouchers to the project. Family Scholar House raised capital funds in the community to support the project, and the Ezekiel Foundation made a capital contribution. Similar resources are available to other state housing finance agencies, making the financing structure of this program easily replicable in other states.

This project is recognized for some important public and private champions. Kentucky’s First Lady, Glenna Bevin, has long supported opportunities for foster youth and lends her support to the very worthwhile endeavor. The James Graham Brown Foundation also backs this project because it aligns with their goals of education and workforce readiness, community and economic prosperity, and a quality of life that engenders an inviting and compassionate community. Frank Harshaw, CEO of Harshaw Trane, grew up in foster care and established the Harshaw Family Foundation to support children’s issues, education, arts, and human services.

Cathe Dykstra, President and CEO of Family Scholar House, believes so strongly in the mission of the organization that she refers to herself as the Chief Possibility Officer. She knows that “people come here to be able to change the direction of their lives.” Family Scholar House has a proven track record of helping individuals achieve their college dreams, thereby, transforming their lives and putting their families on a path of sustainable self-sufficiency. The completion rate for college credit hours attempted by Family Scholar House participants is 93 percent. So far, 371 Family Scholar House participants have earned college degrees. The Riverport Landings Family Scholar House has put this goal within reach for many more young people who were served by the foster care system.

Replicable Model for Other Housing Finance Agencies

Other state housing agencies can replicate this model and help a large, underserved population of youth exit foster care and work toward self-sufficiency. KHC’s Scholar House model started with One-Parent Scholar House in Lexington, Kentucky and has grown to nine campuses throughout Kentucky. Other states have visited the Scholar Houses of Kentucky making inquiries in their home states regarding the possible launch of similar programs. Ohio provided funding for a Scholar House in Columbus that was completed in 2016. With Section 8 Rental Assistance, Housing Credits, HOME funds, local and community government, and educational facility support, the Scholar House model can be successfully replicated anywhere there is an accepted college, university, technical, or professional accredited institution willing. The program’s foster youth component can be developed with a local housing office, a state housing agency, state child welfare agency, child development agency, staff, interns, volunteers, and parents who want to participate.