Developing a Life Skills Curriculum for Homeless Youth

Prepared by the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars program is a health policy research fellowship designed to integrate the clinical expertise of physicians with training in health policy research methods to help them find solutions for the challenges facing the U.S. health care system.

The program includes training in leadership and community-based participatory research. The fellowship strives to develop future leaders and innovators in a variety of fields: research, community organizations, public health and beyond.

We think of ourselves as a group of doctors who have taken time away from our traditional environments in the hospitals and clinics, to dive deep into our communities to understand more about health and disease. We understand that most of the time when we meet our patients, they have a collection of health behaviors and other medical or psychosocial problems that have developed in the environments in which they live. So in order to understand the health of our patients, we need to better understand both the places where our patients live and the lives they lead.

The University of Pennsylvania is one of the four participating universities in the RWJ Clinical Scholars program. Each site selects several scholars from a competitive pool of applicants drawn from all medical and surgical specialties. The 2012-2014 cohort of the University of Pennsylvania Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars conducted this project and authored this report through a partnership with the Covenant House Pennsylvania. The Clinical Scholars are listed below:

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1. BACKGROUND

Covenant House was founded in 1972 with the mission to help homeless youth escape the streets. Today, Covenant House is the largest privately-funded agency in the Americas providing food, shelter, immediate crisis care, and essential services to homeless and runaway kids.

Covenant House Pennsylvania, (CHP), was established in 1999. Services began at Covenant House Pennsylvania with a Community Outreach Center, where young people were offered both a place to eat, as well as referrals for more complex needs such as housing and medical care. Covenant House Pennsylvania is the largest private child welfare agency in the Delaware Valley, and the largest provider of services to homeless and runaway youth in Philadelphia.

CHP provides a full range of services to meet the complex needs of homeless and runaway youth, including Street Outreach programs, a 51-bed Crisis Center, transitional living programs, and Community Service Center. CHP serves over 5,000 homeless kids every year.

a. Covenant House Mission Statement:

We who recognize God’s providence and fidelity to his people are dedicated to living out his covenant among ourselves and those children we serve, with absolute respect and unconditional love. That commitment calls us to serve suffering children of the street, and to protect and safeguard all children. Just as Christ in his humanity is the visible sign of God’s presence among his people, so our efforts together in the covenant community are a visible sign that effects the presence of God, working through the Holy Spirit among ourselves and our kids.

5 Core Principals of Covenant House:

Immediacy
Homeless kids come to Covenant House in crisis. Immediately and without question, we meet their basic human needs – a nourishing meal, a shower, clean clothes, medical attention, and a safe place away from the dangers of the street.

Sanctuary
Homeless kids arriving at our door are often frightened and mistrustful. Young men and women can grow only when they feel safe and secure – Covenant House protects them from the perils of the street and offers that important sense of security.

Value Communication
Lying, cheating, and stealing are common survival tools on the street. Covenant House teaches by example that caring relationships are based on trust, respect, and honesty.

Structure
Homeless kids never know how they will get their next meal or where they will sleep. Covenant House provides the stability and structure necessary to build a positive future.

Choice
Young people often feel powerless to control their lives, and fall into a self-defeating cycle of failure. Covenant House fosters confidence, encouraging young people to believe in themselves and make smart choices for their lives.

Covenant House is dedicated to serving all of God’s children with absolute respect and unconditional love… to help suffering homeless kids… and to protect and safeguard all children in need.

b. Covenant House Charge to the RWJ Clinical Scholars

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the life skills needs of homeless youth entering a shelter. To develop a comprehensive curriculum, which can be provided over a 30-day period based on evidence-based best practices and needs assessments designed to improve self esteem, life skills, drug and alcohol awareness and parenting skills of homeless youth.
2. EXPLORATION OF CHARGE

a. Stakeholder Interviews

Covenant House Pennsylvania:

At Covenant House Pennsylvania, we were able to talk to the following individuals in order to further investigate the charge and develop a response. We discussed the development of a life skills curriculum with: Cordella Hill (Executive Director), Hugh Organ (Associate Executive Director), Lu'Crecha Coats and Amy Phelps (Social Workers), Pastor Dave, Denise Johnson (Vocational Staff), Iva Bonaparte (Health Educator), four Youth Advisors, and a panel of six current residents.

What We Learned

Current Challenges
The Covenant House has three main obstacles in developing a comprehensive life skills curriculum: transient stay of residents, defining the most important life skills, and implementing a life skills curriculum.

Resident Population:
The average stay of residents is less than thirty days. Within this cohort of residents some leave after several days and others make several trips in and out of the program. Around forty percent of the residents make a successful discharge to transitional housing. This turnover of residents makes it difficult to construct and implement a successful life-skills curriculum.

But despite these challenges, one of the successful programs is the vocational curriculum of CHOICES. Led by two vocational staff, the sessions run Tuesday-Thursday with a mandatory of four hours of classes a day. CHOICES aims to prepare residents to conduct job-searching activities. At Covenant House, ninety percent of residents complete this program. The CHOICES program may thus serve as a model structure for an intervention that focuses on life skills more broadly.

Life Skills Curriculum:
Several themes emerged from our discussions with Covenant House staff and residents about developing an appropriate life skills curriculum. Staff members want to deliver useful life skills lessons for residents to be successful as they transition from the shelter. Currently, lessons are not structured but happen as ‘hodgepodge’ – meaning that life skill sessions are sporadic and without a consistent theme. While the lessons are taught by the youth advisors or outside organizations, some of these lessons are more successful than others. We discussed with several members of the staff and residents major categories for life skills curriculum.

Three central themes for a life-skill curriculum came out of our conversations with staff: Hygiene, Budgeting/financial, and ‘Soft Skills’ (conflict resolution, motivation to change, and resilience).
When residents were asked about hygiene, most said that sessions were needed. In the past, a successful module had been taught on clothes washing which succeeded in being both informative and interactive. Residents placed various clothes in baskets representing how often they should be worn prior to washing. Although this particular session was positively received, there is concern about extrapolating such a format to sessions on more sensitive topics such as showering or brushing teeth. Addressing such personal hygiene issues directly, could lead to certain residents being isolated and shamed. In addition as noted by Ms. Johnson, residents may have logical reasons for not brushing their teeth. For example it may be used as a protective measure not wanting anyone to be close to because of previous experiences of physical or sexual abuse. In light of some of the limitations related to hygiene curricula voiced by stakeholders, we modified our own recommended approach to this topic, to be discussed later (See Section Personal Hygiene).

Staff also emphasized the absence of effective and engaging means to teach budgeting and fiscal matters. From writing a check, balancing a checking account, or opening a bank account, these skills were clearly imperative, but difficult to teach in a way that was not, frankly, boring. Moreover, staff mentioned that there is no repository of lessons to reference. These challenges made it difficult to teach this specific life skill.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, both staff and residents articulated the imperative to develop “soft skills.” Most residents stated they were content with the current programming. However, when asked specifically about their perspectives on how to improve the life skill curriculum, quotes include: “how to make it in life”, “how to deal with challenges’ and ‘teach something about discipline’. Overall a major consistent theme from the residents was that ‘change had to come from the resident themselves’. This theme was echoed by several staff members on the challenges around teaching residents about ‘individual responsibility’, ‘maintaining relationships’ and ‘conflict resolution. Despite the consistent emphasis of the need for instruction in such soft skills, it was equally clear that there were limited interventions currently being employed to address these issues.

**Implementation:**
Aside from the development of an appropriate life skills curriculum, an additional challenge noted by the staff was the logistical impediments to curriculum dissemination. From the staff perspective, there is a lack of repository of lessons to conduct these sessions, and in addition, some youth advisors mentioned that the sessions get canceled for various conflicts. For example a youth advisor scheduled to give a presentation was drawn out of the session to deal with a conflict between residents. From the resident perspective, the sessions fail because they are not mandatory and thus residents have limited incentive to attend. As a curriculum is created some of these structural issues will need to be addressed.
Outside Groups and Stakeholders:

Dan McVey and Residents of Rights of Passage (ROP)

Background: ROP is an apartment complex of subsidized housing with a capacity of 20 residents in northeast Philadelphia. ROP Residents come from Covenant House Philadelphia, and must be working in order to pay rent ($50/month). The average stay is 9-12 months, and during that time, residents learn life skills and often begin formal education of some kind while also working.

Key Findings

Life Skills Curriculum: The ROP residents are required to participate in four life skills courses per month, but are also learning life skills every day from each other and the staff. The Life Skills curriculum consists of real-world, practical issues like food shopping and cooking, housekeeping, finance, and job applications. Courses are taught by the staff as well as occasional outside groups (eg. someone from a local bank).

- Life Skills that Covenant House residents need: ROP residents, in reflecting back on their time at Covenant House, wish that “soft-skills” life skills had been emphasized more. They believe that issues like motivation/ planning your day, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and dealing with family issues are the most necessary to address in order to get more Covenant House residents to be ready for the next step. They say that there is always a group of Covenant House residents who are almost ready to assume adult responsibilities, but these soft skills hold them back. If they had a better grasp of these skills, the Covenant House residents would be better equipped to make the leap towards independence.

- Importance of Peer Mentorship: When asked how these soft skills would be best delivered to the Covenant House residents, the ROP residents said that these discussions would have more impact if they were led by peers. They said that residents are more likely to pay attention when challenges related to soft-skill development are voiced by their peers.

- Willingness to Participate in Peer Mentorship Program: In discussing peer mentorship for soft skills education with the ROP residents and Dan McVey, these stakeholders seemed excited about the possibility. ROP residents often express interest in giving back to Covenant House. They are currently required to participate in 4 hours of community service a month, and we believe that peer mentorship would be an ideal way to fulfill this requirement.

Allison Moore of Valley Youth House

Background: Valley Youth House is a multi-faceted organization whose mission is to provide a multitude of services to homeless youth and their families. These services
include a shelter, independent living programs, behavioral health services and prevention and intervention programs.

**Key Findings:**

- Critical thinking skills and problem solving strategies amongst homeless youth are badly needed.

- Success for these youth requires the ability to assess a situation, identify the problem and then locate and utilize available resources to determine an effective solution.

- Valley Youth House uses peers teachers successfully. Incentivizing effort and reliability amongst the peer teachers is crucial.

- Classes should be relevant and experiential. Some suggested speakers or field trips from and to such places as PECO and the Department of Motor Vehicles.

- Must incentivize youth participation in classes, e.g. factor class attendance into discharge decision

- Make classes fun and content appropriate for youth, i.e., at the level of appropriate for their current experience and circumstances.

- Finding the appropriate teacher is key to the curriculum’s success. Teachers must be engaging and able to manage a group without dominating the discussion.

**Dominique Miller of Achieving Independence Center**

**Background:** Achieving Independence Center (AIC) runs a comprehensive classroom based life skills curriculum taught by two dedicated life skills teachers. There are 19 classes. The topics are divided into hard skills (“Fundamentals”) and soft skills (“Journals”) They incent attendance using financial rewards ($50 for completion of Fundamentals; $50 for completion of Journals).

**Key Findings:**

- Youth often require several attempts to “get it right”. Often attending classes multiple times before they understand the content. Unfortunately, a number of youth do not learn the content during the time that they are eligible to receive services.

- Recommend using a web-based approach to reinforce the classroom learning. This will allow to youth to access the information when they are no longer eligible for services and when they have to apply the life skills, e.g. when they sign their first lease.

- Recommend using hand-outs and having a formal exam to reinforce learning.

**Specific Topic Advice**
Personal Hygiene: Use experiential learning. For example, giving youth $20 and sending them to CVS to buy products to maintain personal hygiene.

Budgeting: Recommend encouraging youth to get their credit reports. This will give youth the opportunity to be proactive about negative issues on their credit reports and will teach them about problem solving.

Soft Skills: Recommend starting each class with open-ended questions to assess the knowledge level of the group and ensure the content is relevant to group. Examples of open-ended question: What do you know? What do you want to know?

General Advice

- Recommend one full day course rather than individual courses on daily basis.
- Recommend using food to incentivize attendance.
- Consider reducing the time spend job hunting and divert this time to life skills training.
- Recommend the following on-line content resource: http://www.caseylifeskills.org

William Little of Youth Emergency Service

Background: Youth Emergency Service caters to young homeless youth (12-17) and although there is no formal life skills curriculum, they have a well established sexual health education series. This is taught by a sexual health educator; involves weekly evening classes and attendance is mandatory.

Key Findings:

- Mandatory attendance ensures 100% attendance. This system is effective for younger youth but is likely to be challenging in older youth.

- Advises that peer mentoring is “tricky”. Recommends that peer mentors are well trained. Also recommends being especially careful when selecting youth who identify themselves as peer mentors. Advises that it is important to ensure that self identified peer mentors have gained their skills by conventional means.

- Recommends the following topics as priorities in a life skills curriculum: Personal hygiene, Budgeting, Soft Skills I (Personal Attitude; For example, learning not to say everything that comes into their heads), Soft Skills II (Learning the individual steps required to achieve a goal)

Jacinto Grant of Attic Youth Center
**Background:** The Attic Center is a Youth Center for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, and Questioning (LBGTQ) Youth. It is open in the evenings and provides a place for LBGTQ Youth to take part in youth center activities. They also offer additional services including personal and family counseling, HIV Testing, LBGTQ Outreach Program (Bryson Institute). The Attic incorporates youth involvement in the leadership staff. They have both youth staff (paid one year job where youth help run youth center activities) and also a youth planning committee (similar to a student governing body). Youth self identify themselves for these leadership positions and through this involvement peer mentoring takes place.

**Key Findings:**

- Use physical space to encourage participation. They use every room/space to host the various activities. This encourages active engagement in the daily program.

- Advises that successful life skills training can take place in an informal setting “success comes out of the informal stuff”

- Life skills training occurs on a one-on-one basis as the youth get to know the staff. There is no formal curriculum but the various activities and open door policy amongst the leadership create an environment for informal life skills training.

- Recommends the following topics as priorities in a life skills curriculum: Acquiring skills to maintain a job (not just stopping at training youth to get any job); Time management skills (instilling the realization that it takes sacrifice to elevate yourself from one level to the next); Budgeting.

**Don Schwarz: City Health Commissioner, Philadelphia**

- Emphasized that focusing on job skills is imperative
- Further emphasized that soft-skills as a way to maintain jobs is critical
- Suggested the importance of community resources and partnerships

**Dr. Ken Ginsberg, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia**

- Emphasized focus should be upon soft-skills
- Reiterated the value of peer mentoring but stressed importance of rigorous training
- Hygiene lessons could be best taught in pamphlets disseminated in clinical spaces. Moreover, care must be taken to deliver hygiene curricula in a manner that is not patronizing to youth
- Budgeting could be best taught as a game, such as monopoly, that engages youth and asks them to make relevant decisions
- Soft skills curricula should focus as much upon the skills youth have, and how to use them, as upon building skills that may be lacking
b. Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to assess the current knowledge on the development, implementation, and outcomes of a life skills curriculum. In addition, a review was conducted to assess whether a peer education model could be leverage to implement a life skills curriculum.

Life Skills

Key Findings

- Life skills curricula have been implemented and studied among the homeless, those with mental illness, and those with a history of drug and alcohol abuse
- The top three areas of focus among life skills curricula included hygiene, finances and professionalism
- The duration of life skills curricula were typical 12 weeks or longer. In addition, there are no published evidence of a successful 30 day curriculum

Key References

Peer Education

Key Findings

· Peer education has been a successful approach to improve knowledge, attitudes, and skills among young people

· The most promising interventions addressed multiple domains including individual and peer, family, school and community

· The success of a peer education program depends on the fit between the location, approach, and recipient group

· Repetition of a peer education program has sustained and enhanced benefits

Key References


Approaches to Life Skills Curricula

Key Findings

· Several approaches exist, some of which are drawn from other skill development among at risk-youth, such as approaches to safe-sex

· For example, protocols for development of skills such as “negotiating” “feeling recognition,” and “self talk” exist, and can be distributed to trainers as model for development of particular life-skills

· These resources will be delivered to Covenant House, and as the curriculum is delivered and evaluated, relevant aspects of these protocols can be applied to the life-skill of interest
CDC also has a wealth of resources on enhancing youth “Protective Factors,” which in many ways are synonymous with life-skills in that they give youth an ability to deal with many stressful situations. Such materials are referenced below.

Key References
- Street Smart Curricula, Protocols 1-10. Personal Correspondence: Charles B. Collins, Jr. Ph. D. Team Leader, Science Application Team Capacity Building Branch National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
c. Salient Findings

Through our interviews with Covenant House, outside groups and stakeholders, and our literature review, we found several recurring themes which we considered in our response to the Charge.

The Importance of Intrinsic Motivation

Whether it came from the words of a resident who identified when exactly it was that he or she decided to turn her life around, or from an academic discussion on theories of behavior change, it was clear that the intrinsic motivation of the individual is a critical prerequisite for any life skills curriculum.

The Challenges of a Comprehensive Life Skills Program

Given the transient nature of the average duration of stay for a resident at Covenant House, and the finding that some life skills are not appropriate for youth in the middle of a crisis, it was clear that a creating a comprehensive life skills program would be both unwieldy and not sustainable. Furthermore, the goal is to create a curriculum appropriate for the population at Covenant House. Thus, we decided on an approach that developed a focused life skills curriculum that could be taught in a time frame suited to the needs of these youth.

Modifying Teaching Methodology Based on Topic

In our own analysis of the different types of life skills curricula, we found that there was a distinct difference between “hard” skills, such as personal hygiene, budgeting and finance, as opposed to “soft” skills, which can include motivation, handling conflict, adjusting to change, and handling external pressures and influences. Homeless youth respond to the teaching of these topics in very different ways, and thus it is necessary to adapt the teaching methodology to the topic presented.

The Value of Peer Involvement

Especially in areas where behavior change or modification is needed, it is clear from the evidence that peer education has been successful in creating improved outcomes that are sustainable and can help those individuals for whom traditional inventions have not been effective. In programs like Rights of Passage, we have identified former residents of Covenant House who have successfully moved to transitional housing. These individuals may provide a cohort of peers that may enhance the teaching of life skills.
d. Modified Goal

In order to assist the Covenant House Pennsylvania to develop a curriculum to provide their youth with a foundation of essential life skills that is sustainable, relevant, adaptable and expandable, we found it necessary to modify the given charge and thus we developed the following goal:

To develop a focused life skills curriculum, which can be provided over a distinct period of time based on evidence-informed practices designed to improve the ability of homeless youth to adapt from a life in the streets to a more stable housing environment. To this end, we will provide a framework of specific modules to teach soft-skills. We will also suggest a repository of well-vetted resources that can be used in either a class format, or in the youth’s own time, to teach budgeting and hygiene skills in a an engaging and informative manner.
3. IMPLEMENTING A CURRICULUM

a. Three Primary Content Areas

Personal Hygiene

The personal hygiene of Covenant House Pennsylvania (CHPA) youth was a common concern raised by the staff and stakeholders we interviewed. Adolescent hygiene needs include:

- Body odor and sweating
- Oral health (including bad breath)
- Oily skin and acne
- Unwanted or oily hair
- Feminine hygiene
- Piercing maintenance

Staff expressed that many of the runaway and homeless youth at CHPA lacked the knowledge and skills to maintain good hygiene. Poor hygiene can negatively affect their health, social relationships, and job opportunities. While we recognize the importance of teaching personal hygiene skills to the CHPA youth, we are mindful that this must be done in a sensitive and respectful way. A classroom based, didactic-approach could be viewed as insulting and/or embarrassing to the residents. Therefore, we recommend using one or more of the following approaches to teaching personal hygiene:

1. Referring residents to patient information websites (see Table 1) and You-tube videos (see Table 2) to allow self-education.

2. Holding a contest (“Cov’s Got Talent”) for residents to compete against each other (as individuals or groups) to create their own 3-minute You-tube video pertaining to a particular aspect of adolescent hygiene (eg. body odor). Residents should be advised to use the health information contained in a list of recommended websites (Table 1) for the content of their video. They may use existing hygiene videos as models (Table 2), but be challenged to create more creative, relevant versions for their age-demographic. They should be provided access to video/computer equipment and staff with expertise in video editing to help them create the video. The contest will culminate with an airing of all videos (pre-screened by a CH staff member for appropriateness) to an audience of peers and staff, who will have the opportunity to vote for their favorite. The winning video should be one that conveys accurate, relevant health information in a creative way. The prize for the contest winner(s) could include uploading of their video onto the CHPA website (or an alternative reward as deemed appropriate by CH staff). The contest could be repeated every few months, each time with a variation of the video topic. Alternatively, there could be a contest to create the best educational hygiene-related poster (using digital software) to be displayed around CH.

This contest approach has unique advantages of promoting self-learning about sensitive topics while engaging the creativity of CHPA youth. It will also enable creation of a library
of educational videos - made by residents, for future residents of CHPA.

Finally, we realize that residents may confide in the Youth Advisors, Social Workers, or other CHPA staff about hygiene-related concerns (or a range of other health issues). We recommend that the CHPA staff also consult the recommended hygiene websites (Table 1) to prepare themselves for these situations, but to have a low threshold for referring residents to the CHPA Health Center to discuss concerns with a health care provider (as needed). CHPA Health Center staff could consider providing periodic trainings to the Youth Advisors, Social Workers, and other non-medical staff to promote health education.

Recommended Websites for Adolescent Hygiene Topics

**Boston Children’s Hospital (Centers for Young Women’s and Young Men’s Health)**

- [http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/](http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/)
- [http://www.youngmenshealthsite.org/](http://www.youngmenshealthsite.org/)

Very comprehensive medical information about health and hygiene-related topics (body odor, oral health, acne, hair removal, etc.) with printable, gender-specific patient information sheets in English and Spanish. Target audience is mid to older adolescents.

**Centers for Disease Control (Body and Mind - BAM!)**

- [http://www.bam.gov/sub_youbody/index.html](http://www.bam.gov/sub_youbody/index.html)

Information on a range of adolescent health topics including fitness/nutrition, peer pressure, bullying, safety, etc. The “Body” section contains information about puberty, hand-washing, and oral health. The “Teacher’s Corner” section contains printable handouts for adolescents and recommended activities for teaching about health. Target audience is younger adolescents.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Girlshealth.gov)**

- [http://www.girlshealth.gov/body/grooming/index.cfm](http://www.girlshealth.gov/body/grooming/index.cfm)

The “Body” section provides information on sweating, bad breath, acne, hair care, douching, makeup, tanning, tattoos/piercing, cosmetic surgery for young adolescent females (ages 10-16).

**Nemours DuPont (TeensHealth)**

- [http://kidshealth.org/teen/](http://kidshealth.org/teen/)
- [http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/take_care/hygiene_basic.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/take_care/hygiene_basic.html)

The “Hygiene” section teaches about puberty, sweat and body odor, skin care, body hair and shaving, bad breath, athlete’s foot, feminine hygiene, etc. The audio format option (both
English and Spanish) is ideal for adolescents with limited literacy.

**Columbia Health (Go Ask Alice!)

- [http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/](http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/)
- [http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/general-health](http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/general-health)

“General Health Q&A” provides frank, practical advice to Columbia University students on unique topics such as body decoration, body maintenance, etc. (eg. “What to do with pubic hair?” and “Pondering the pros and cons of tongue piercing”). Target audience is older adolescents.

**Casey Life Skills (Self Care/ Personal Hygiene)


The “Self Care / Personal Hygiene” section allows creation of individual or group learning plans for various hygiene-related life skills, but requires purchase of teaching manuals. Without this, staff could still use the “learning objectives” to set their educational goals.

**Budgeting and Finance**

Another major content area of concern for staff is the importance of developing a curriculum around budgeting and finance. The youth, often for the first time, are obtaining an income from recent employment however they do not have the experience in managing this money. From opening a bank account, creating a budget for monthly expenses, or learning about credit cards the youth have rarely encountered these situations. Despite the need for appropriate curriculum on budgeting and finances for at-risk youth there are only limited appropriate resources available. Below we have developed a strategy we hope is dynamic, iterative, and sustainable in creating an appropriate finance/budgeting curriculum for the youth at CHPA.

**Development of Curriculum:**

The youth at CHPA need a curriculum that is relevant in addressing their current needs. To obtain this relevance we propose the following:

- Youth advisors brainstorm topics with current residents, Rites of Passage (ROP) residents, and staff
- Select the top 6-8 topics to create financial life skill sessions (examples include opening bank account, renting an apartment, etc.)
- Youth advisors can help create clear objectives for each of the topics selected
- Resources in developing these objectives are listed at the end of this section

**Implementation:**
In implementing a new curriculum the sessions should be interactive and draw on the experience and situations of current residents. Here are few key strategies:

- Teaching should be less didactic and more interactive
- Youth advisors should run sessions under the leadership of the social workers
  - Each youth advisor should take ownership over one topic and create an appropriate teaching session
- More experiential learning, the better. Realistic monetary quantities and relevant situations
- Sessions should be conducted once a week and residents should be encouraged to attend as many of the classes as possible. Promoting attendance will be discussed in subsequent sections of this report.
- Sessions should be individual classes, lasting no longer than 30 minutes, rather than the block schedule which will be more appropriate for the “soft skills” portion of the curriculum
- Example approach to covering subject matter: Have residents work together to create a board game relating to financial decisions (modeled after Monopoly or the game of LIFE)
  - Game would start at Covenant House, PA crisis center and end at independent living.
  - Residents would help to create points along the board game’s path
  - Residents would also think of possible life events that could occur along the way that may impact their finances e.g., getting a new job, having to miss work due to illness, childcare costs, etc.

Alternative Strategies --

Online Games:
http://www.practicalmoneyskills.com/games/

Financial Football – The NFL and Visa Inc. have created a multiple-choice game that engages students in learning money management skills. These games can be done individually during the time allotted for the class and has the advantage that residents can progress at their own pace.

Resident made videos:
“Cov’s Got Talent”—Similar to the approach described in the hygiene section, residents could compete against each other (as individuals or groups) to create their own 3-minute You-tube video pertaining to a particular aspect of budgeting or finance. The youth advisors should monitor the content of the videos for accuracy and appropriateness. Winning videos could become part of a repository of videos accessible via the internet that would serve as a more permanent, sustainable source of information for both current and former Covenant House residents.

Assessment:
A life skills curriculum cannot improve without feedback from the residents and youth advisors.

Evaluation could include:
- Brief quantitative and qualitative assessment tools (3-5 questions) surrounding the key concepts covered in the sessions.
- Collect feedback from youth advisors
- Topics should be added or changed on a quarterly or semi-annual basis

**Recommended websites for resources on finances and budgeting:**

**Casey Life Skills (Housing and Money Management)**
http://www.caseylifeskills.org/

The “Housing and Money Management” section has a number of relevant topics to assess and address the needs of at-risk youth. Some of the material does require purchase of teaching material, however (as stated above) staff can still use appropriate ‘learning objectives to set educational goals.

**Mapping Your Future**
http://www.mappingyourfuture.org/Money/

Nonprofit organization providing financial literacy information for students, families, and educators. Topics include information about budgeting, using credit cards, and useful information about importance of credit report.

**Money and Stuff**
http://www.moneyandstuff.info/educators.html

Established by Ohio’s credit unions to promote financial literacy among youth, the website has several games and lesson plans on budgeting and spending.
Soft Skills, taught by Peer Mentorship Program

Background

· As discussed previously, stakeholders believe that soft skills are a particularly important area of life skills to address in the Covenant House population.

· In particular, issues of motivation, self-awareness, and ability to work with others were seen as paramount.

· The goal in addressing this area is to help those residents are almost ready to assume adult responsibilities and move on to more stable living situations.

· Peer mentorship is felt by many stakeholders to be a powerful tool in enabling the discussion of these soft skills.

· ROP residents are the perfect group of peers to provide this mentorship, as they are eager to give back to Covenant House and have recently or are actively thinking about these life skills themselves.

· With that in mind, the RWJ Fellows consulted with an expert in the field of adolescent and young adult peer mentorship to create a curriculum relevant to the Covenant House residents.

· The consultant is Sharon Powell, founder of Princeton Center for Leadership Training, currently founding principal of Princeton Leadership Group.

Focus on Four Modules

· Motivation/ Goals
o **Theme:** Setting goals and staying motivated to complete our goals can be challenging. We will examine obstacles that can get in the way of achieving our goals and how we can overcome obstacles.

o **Activity:** Goal-setting chart; obstacle cards

o **Strategy:** Each person will share a personal goal; pick up and read an obstacle card; and suggest how to overcome that obstacle, either from real experience or problem-solving.

o **Reflections:** The group will decide which of the obstacles discussed are most likely to interfere with motivation to achieve goals and agree on a plan of action if ever faced with those obstacles.

· **Handling Conflict**

o **Theme:** Interpersonal conflict can be triggered on a moment’s notice. Learning a healthy way to deal with conflict and frustration is critical for successful relationships in personal and work situations.

o **Activity:** Straight talk

o **Strategy:** Watching a “straight talk” role play, learning the tools for straight talk, and practicing this skill in the group.

o **Reflections:** Use boundary-breaking cards to have a discussion about the value of straight talk and when/how it will come in handy in our lives.

· **Adjusting to Change**

o **Theme:** Things change around us every day, and yet it’s so difficult to make personal changes that can benefit us. We are creatures of habit, even if it’s to our detriment.

o **Activity:** Look again: an exercise in change

o **Strategy:** In pairs, members talk about what it’s like to change, and then participate in an engaging way to discover how hard it is to change.

o **Reflections:** Members respond to a mentor’s questions about the impact of this activity and its relevance to their lives.

· **Handling External Pressure/ Influences**

o **Theme:** At times, we feel pressured to do things that are not in our best interest. Thinking out loud about what to do in certain pressured situations can help prepare us for how to handle them if they ever turn up for real.

o **Activity:** A realistic “pressure zone” card is handed out to each member.
- **Strategy:** Each member reads his/her card and suggests a way that he/she would respond to this pressure, drawing on real life situations and consequences. Other members respond with alternative strategies to deal with each pressure in a constructive way.

- **Reflections:** Consider negotiation and refusal skills as a way to respond to everyday pressures. Mentors will role play these skills.

  - **Instructors**
  - **Social Workers**
    - Social workers will spearhead the curriculum for the reasons to be discussed in later section regarding curriculum structure and organization
    - Covenant House staff social workers will receive training on the specific activities and discussions within each of these four modules. The initial training will be done by Dr. Sharon Powell. Subsequent training will rely on the social workers.
    - They will also receive training to augment their group leadership abilities.
    - They will be encouraged to utilize the peer mentors as much as possible, and to turn over leadership of the modules’ activities and discussions to these peer mentors when appropriate.
  
- **Peer Mentors**
  - A select group of peer mentors from ROP as well as recent ROP residents will be trained to participate and lead group discussions and activities.
  - The goal for these mentors will be to lead the discussions and activities within each module as much as possible.
  - Upon completion of leadership training and participation in groups at Covenant House, Peer Mentors will get a certificate of completion and will be able to add the experience to their resume.
  - An additional incentive structure (in addition to paying for transportation to Covenant House) may also be considered, which might further inspire these peer mentors towards active participation. The exact nature of these incentives is at the discretion of Covenant House, PA leadership.

- **Time Structure of the soft skills portion of the curriculum**
  - Soft skills portion of the curriculum well-suited for block schedule structure
  - Model as a day-long retreat occurring at the start of a resident’s stay at Covenant House, PA
· Scheduling earlier on in resident’s stay will lead to higher participation rates given varying lengths of stay

· Proposed schedule: Breakfast, first two modules, lunch break, second two modules and then a social event/small ceremony acknowledging completion

· Logistically simpler given need to accommodate schedules for social workers, peer mentors, and Covenant House residents

· Full day with the same group will create some group bonding and enhance conversations and discussions

b. Structural Considerations

The success of the soft-skills curriculum will depend as much upon its content as upon its organization and leadership. The selection of instructors, the time structure of the classes and the methods employed to promote youth participation are critical to the new curriculum’s success.

Instructor Selection:

Appropriately selected instructors are imperative to the new curriculum. While a large part of being an effective teacher is natural ability, many skills can and should be taught and practiced. We recommend several approaches to training instructors: observation of seasoned instructors, currently available online resources and continual feedback and evaluation. Observation can occur both within and outside Covenant House, PA. Potential instructors should observe life skill classes that are taking place currently at Covenant House, PA and note the strengths and weaknesses of each. Further, when possible, potential instructors should observe well-established courses that are in place at outside institutions in the Philadelphia area such as those in place at The Attic Youth Center and the Achieving Independence Center. Online resources are available to serve as repositories of content as well as aids for development of teaching skills. For example, the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Program has numerous online resources, including life skills assessments and ideas on content presentation, which are available gratis for educational purposes. Real time feedback and evaluations, from supervisors, peers, and students, are invaluable in creating effective teachers; a formal system for such evaluations must be part of any new curriculum design.

The initial step towards creating a core of highly skilled, motivated and prepared teachers is identifying the most appropriate and effective instructors for Covenant House Pennsylvania’s new life skills curriculum. Identifying the right teachers depends on several key variables: familiarity with the subject matter, ability to interact with youth effectively
both within group and individually, stability within the institution and adeptness at delegating tasks to others. Based on these variables, we feel that the Covenant House, PA social workers would be the ideal individuals to lead instruction of the new curriculum.

While the social workers may not initially be content experts on all the taught subjects, their understanding and awareness of the baseline knowledge level, content relevance, and learning barriers for the Covenant House youth, puts the social workers in an ideal position to teach. Such understanding and awareness will allow them to more easily grasp the subject matter being taught and master the most effective ways to teach this material. Managing a group of teenagers and young adults in a classroom setting requires an understanding of group dynamics and group management. Of the available personnel resources at CH, the social workers’ education, training and experience will make them the most skilled at the task of classroom management and leadership. Stable leadership is essential for the adaptability and sustainability of the new curriculum. While the youth advisors could become effective teachers, the higher rate of turnover amongst this group makes them less ideal leaders for the new curriculum. For this reason, we again feel that the social workers’ increased longevity within the organization makes them more ideal leaders. Another advantage of more stable leadership is the benefit of avoiding the need to frequently train new leaders and teachers. Acknowledging their numerous obligations and responsibilities, the entirety of the teaching responsibility cannot fall on the social workers. Rather, the social workers will be tasked with delegating certain teaching duties to youth advisors and other available personnel when appropriate.

**Time Structuring and Scheduling:**

Making the new curriculum as sustainable and comprehensive as possible, while simultaneously reaching all appropriate and eligible youth, demands a thoughtful schedule design. The schedule design must balance several elements: the learning styles of adolescents, the relatively short average length of stay of youth at Covenant House, the busy schedules of the social workers and youth advisors, and other competing obligations for the youths’ time.

The first decision is how to space the curriculum content out over the length of the youths’ stay at Covenant House, PA. The available choices are to cluster the curriculum towards the beginning of a youth’s stay or to spread the content out over a target time period of 30 days. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages that must be considered. The upfront, clustered approach is likely to capture a larger number of eligible youth and is less likely to conflict with the time consuming process of job searching and eventual employment. However, many youth may still be in states of crisis early on in their stay and not as receptive to new information. Spacing classes out over a 30-day period does allow for more adjustment time and consolidation of information, but poses significant organizational obstacles which may make the new curriculum much less sustainable, adaptable and expandable.

The next decision is whether to create blocks of classes versus individual classes occurring at throughout the week. A block schedule would be modeled similarly to the CHOICES,
vocation training program already in place at Covenant House, PA. Courses with similar subject matter would be grouped together and delivered in one-day program: breakfast, followed two hour long sessions, then lunch break, followed by two additional one hour sessions, ending with a social function of some sort. A non-block schedule would be organized as 60 minute classes occurring throughout the week in the time following dinner. Several factors must be weighed in deciding between these two options: the challenges posed by limited personnel with hectic schedules, the best structure for the content being taught, and the ideal learning styles for the Covenant House, PA population. While there is evidence long periods of didactics are not ideal for young adult learners, the aforementioned logistical challenges posed by a greater number of individual classes must be weighed.

Examining the pros and cons of all approaches, we feel the best route for Covenant House, PA is a curriculum that delivers the majority of the curriculum early on in the resident’s stay in a larger time block, with a minority of the curriculum as individual time blocks occurring weekly. The more simple logistics of such a design will make the new curriculum more sustainable. The new curriculum design hopes to overcome the concerns regarding the often limited attention spans of young adult learner via the grouping of content related curriculum, unconventional methods that encourage active participation, and well-timed breaks throughout the day.

Promoting Youth Participation:

For this new life skills curriculum, the term comprehensive has a dual meaning. The first refers to the comprehensiveness of educational content. The second refers to the percentage of eligible Covenant House residents who participate in the new curriculum. The hope is to enroll as many appropriate youth as possible in this life skills curriculum. Given this goal, steps to promote attendance and participation are essential.

While making the curriculum mandatory may seem the simplest approach to increasing enrollment, given the target audience for the curriculum is adults who are being asked to find jobs and work towards independence, forced attendance may not be appropriate or productive.

With a voluntary curriculum, sparking youth interest, making the classes the best available activity and creating appropriate incentives for participation are important. Taking lessons from the world of marketing, the curriculum and its classes must have catchy and interesting names. Involving youth in the naming of the curriculum’s classes is an effective way to find names that are relevant and relatable and has the added bonus of encouraging youth buy-in to the curriculum.

Making attendance and participation in classes appealing can be done in several ways. With the block schedule discussed above, the day can be made into a retreat, with breakfast, lunch and a social activity at the day’s end. During the times when classes are occurring, other alternative activities should be limited to encourage class attendance. If access to social areas and recreational activities are restricted during class times, the classes themselves may become more appealing than sitting and doing nothing. Last, incentivizing participation is
an important component for increasing class attendance. With this population, the nature of the incentives is critical. Money and material items may not be appropriate. More appropriate incentives for this population may be prizes that reward class participation with increased privileges and independence, such as later curfews or overnight passes. Recent work on incentives shows that intermittent, unpredictable reward systems such as a lotteries or raffles may be even more effective. Applying this to the curriculum, every class attended or completed could be an entry into a lottery to win a specified prize. A larger incentive that could be linked to class attendance and participation is the factoring of class participation and attendance into the decision regarding a youth’s discharge from Covenant House, PA. Youth who do attend and participate in the entirety of the curriculum must be recognized and this achievement acknowledged. A certificate of completion should be awarded to all youth completing the curriculum along with some overall incentive chosen by the Covenant House, PA leadership.
4. EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF A NEW CURRICULUM

EVALUATING CHANGES

Our long-term goal is to ensure that the curriculum that we develop is sufficiently flexible to permit continued evaluation and improvement. It is not our expectation that the suggested curriculum herein will automatically meet the goals and diverse needs of Covenant House residents. Thus, we have designed a framework that is meant to be an ongoing “work in progress,” and thus suggest tools for evaluation to maintain this constant evolution.

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

We believe that a mixed methods approach will generate the most amount of feedback and ensure that all parties (youth and educators) can become actively engaged in curriculum improvement and sustainability.

Qualitative Evaluation

I. Pre- and Post Surveys (See Appendix 1 for a Sample)
These can be delivered to youth before and after program completion and could be incorporated into the intake and discharge process. We recommend a short survey (to avoid question fatigue). Pre-survey questions might include, “What life skills come naturally to you?” “What life skills might you be lacking?” Post-survey questions might include, “Did this curriculum meet any of your life-skills needs?” “Please be as specific as possible regarding elements of the curriculum that were effective or ineffective.” In addition to standardized questions, we recommend a free response section to allow youth to address topics not covered in the surveys and also to generate new content and new ideas. We believe that the free response section can be used to “crowd source” ideas from the youth themselves and that this form of content creation will allow the curriculum to be shaped by the youth that it serves.

II. Focus Groups
This method of evaluation expands upon the survey data and would invite a select group of residents to answer additional evaluation questions. Again, we recommend a mixture of standardized questions and open-ended questions. The group of participants would include volunteers and “invited residents” - residents who are specifically asked to attend. (The youth advisors/group facilitators/peer educators would help in selecting the invited residents and would aim to select residents who are likely to provide valuable feedback). Participants would be incentive to attend using similar methods outlined above [see section: 3 Steps to Achieving our Goal; Attendance → Incentive]

Quantitative Evaluation

We understand the limitations of using quantitative metrics to measure program success. Specifically, we understand that there are a number of confounding factors that will affect
the quantitative metrics that we outline below. Despite this, we hope for a significant impact. We believe that the provision of life skills is a fundamental key to independence and envisage that a successful life skills curriculum will move the following metrics in a positive direction.

Quantitative Metrics would include:

- Percentage of discharges to Safe Housing or ROP
- Percentage of ROP discharges to independent living
- Percentage of discharges that result in reuniting with family
- Average Duration of Job Retention
- Job Retention to at least 2nd Paycheck
5. CLOSING REMARKS

It is our hope that the curriculum described herein may offer an effective and sustainable life-skills curriculum to Covenant House Pennsylvania. It is recognized that the curriculum described in these pages is a “living document,” and as such, will evolve as needed to best meet the needs of the youth and staff at CHP. It has been an honor and privilege to participate in the development of this curriculum, and we cannot over-emphasize our appreciation to the staff and youth at CHP, and all involved stakeholders.
6. APPENDIX—Condensed List of Resources, see appropriate section for descriptions of resources

**Hygiene**

Boston Children’s Hospital (Centers for Young Women’s and Young Men’s Health)
·  http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/
·  http://www.youngmenshealthsite.org/

Centers for Disease Control (Body and Mind - BAM!)
·  http://www.bam.gov/index.html
·  http://www.bam.gov/sub_yourbody/index.html
·  http://www.bam.gov/teachers/index.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (GirlsHealth.gov)
·  http://www.girlshealth.gov/body/grooming/index.cfm

Nemours DuPont (TeensHealth)
·  http://kidshealth.org/teen/
·  http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/take_care/hygiene Basics.html

Columbia Health (Go Ask Alice!)
·  http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/
·  http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/general-health

Casey Life Skills (Self Care/ Personal Hygiene)
·  http://www.caseylifeskills.org/pages/lp/lp_sc_personalhygiene.htm?id=33

**Finance**

http://www.practicalmoneyskills.com/games/

Casey Life Skills (Housing and Money Management)
http://www.caseylifeskills.org/

 teaching material, however (as stated above) staff can still use appropriate ‘learning objectives to set educational goals.

http://www.mappingyourfuture.org/Money/

http://www.moneyandstuff.info/educators.html

7. REFERENCES

http://www.covenanthouse.org/about-homeless-charity (Downloaded September 4, 2012)

http://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-youth-shelter/pennsylvania (Downloaded September 4, 2012)

Aviles A, Helfrich CA. Life skills service needs: Perspectives of homeless youth. *Journal of*


Street Smart Curricula, Protocols 1-10. Personal Correspondence: Charles B. Collins, Jr. Ph. D. Team Leader, Science Application Team Capacity Building Branch National Center
for HIV, STD and TB Prevention Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/protective.htm