As young people transition from adolescence to adulthood, access to food, housing, health care, and income can shape their life trajectories and determine whether they meet their full potential. Despite their resourcefulness and resilience, young people without sufficient income or family support to meet their basic needs may find safety net programs essential.

But the web of public safety net programs has substantial gaps that leave many people without the supports they need. This is true for people of all ages, but young people face unique challenges related to their age and development stage that make these gaps even bigger and more harmful. Many safety net programs—including food, cash, and housing assistance—are not set up to accommodate young people’s developmental stage or life circumstances, such as instability in living arrangements or limited access to personal documentation.

Benefit agencies administering safety net programs can take the following steps to better help young people access and navigate these supports and set them up for long-term success in life.

**SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACCESSING SAFETY NET PROGRAMS**

- **Designate staff who work specifically with young people** and who understand the unique challenges they face.

- **Conduct youth-focused outreach** by working with young people to reach out to their peers, using social media, and working with trusted intermediaries.

- **Collaborate with other agencies** to create a mobile app, database, map, or pamphlet that explains where, what, and how each agency and organization in the area serves young people.

- **Make applications more accessible** by ensuring they are easily understood and available in different languages and at appropriate literacy levels, that young people can get help filling them out, and that young people are not penalized for inadvertent paperwork mistakes.

- **Provide flexible options to access the agency**, including in-person, by phone, and online, and offer flexible office hours.

- **Make requirements for benefits access more flexible**, including the kinds and amount of documentation needed to access benefits.
EMPOWER AND SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISIONMAKING

- Make sure staff members working with young people show respect, empathy, and genuine care for their growth.
- Support young people in learning about and understanding how to access benefits so they can manage the process on their own.
- Ensure young people have the information they need to make informed decisions about program participation.
- Include young people as collaborators in agency or office decisionmaking and listen to their advice.
- Consult young people to identify ways to simplify benefits access and retention, as their experiences can provide important insights into the challenges they face accessing benefit programs.

REPLACE PUNITIVE APPROACHES WITH SUPPORT AND TRUST

- Recognize the importance of mental health and trauma-informed supports for young people, and work to help them access mental health services.
- Develop systems of mutual accountability and relationship building that support young people, even when they make mistakes. Apply harm-reduction approaches that lessen social or physical consequences and ensure young people feel safe and respected.

TAKE A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO BENEFITS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- Work with other benefit agencies to improve coordination, reduce gaps, and recognize young people’s unique needs, including groups facing extra challenges such as those transitioning from foster care, experiencing homelessness, being young parents, or having been involved with the legal system.

ADDITIONAL READING

REPORT
Young People’s Lived Experiences with Safety Net Programs: Insights from Young People and Youth-Serving Organizations
Heather Hahn, Lauren Farrell, Amelia Coffey, and Gina Adams https://urbn.is/3lr0rnA

BRIEF
Stabilizing Young People Transitioning to Adulthood: Opportunities and Challenges with Key Safety Net Programs
Gina Adams, Heather Hahn, and Amelia Coffey https://urbn.is/3tnRCxc

ADDITIONAL PROJECT RESOURCES
Young People and the Safety Net https://urbn.is/3DhNfYI

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

We examined key barriers and supports available for young people ages 14 to 24 seeking safety net programs, including housing assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance.

Our participatory research project incorporated the perspectives of young people who currently or previously accessed or needed to access the safety net, and the community service providers that support them. We learned from young people’s and staff members’ experiences and insights to develop a more thorough understanding of issues and solutions.