



City Living NY

Holistic Services Award

Strategies utilized by an AOI Awards Program winner to support youth aging out of foster care on all five fronts: education, employment, housing, life skills, and relationships

Copyright © 2020 by Aging Out Institute

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or re-distribution through any other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, write to Aging Out Institute, addressed “Attention: Publications Coordinator,” at this email address: publications@agingoutinstitute.org.

About the AOI Holistic Services Award

The Aging Out Institute (AOI) National Awards Program recognizes organizations for the work that they are doing to help foster youth age out of foster care and into independence successfully. Relationship building, higher education, independent housing, life skills, and steady employment are key factors that contribute to a young person’s success transitioning out of care. However, they also can be the key challenges that hinder youth from success. In an effort to overcome these challenges, AOI celebrates and shares the programs and strategies that are effective in helping foster youth along the way to adulthood.

This year, City Living NY (CLNY) won the AOI Holistic Services Award for their work in all five of the key categories that their program covers: education, employment, housing, life skills, and building strong, supportive relationship. CLNY also won the Life Skills Award, recognizing the work the organization does to ensure that youth have the skills needed to live on their own.





The Story behind CLNY

Earlier in her career, Liz Northcutt, Executive Director and Founder of CLNY, was working at a non-profit social service agency and was assigned to help a young woman, Ashley (name changed for privacy), find housing just three months before she aged out of the foster care system. Ashley submitted a public housing application, but for several months she couch-surfed, essentially a homeless young woman--which in a way, she had always been because as a young child, Ashley was removed from her family's home due to neglect. She then spent her adolescence bouncing from home to home, living with strangers. The resulting trauma left her ill-equipped to manage the challenges ahead.

When Ashley finally moved into an apartment, she was no longer eligible for the Administration for Children's Services one-time voucher covering a few basic pieces of furniture. Liz reached out to friends and found a futon mattress (not a full futon...just a mattress). It was at least something for her to sleep on. A few months later, Liz visited Ashley. She was thrilled to have a home of her own, but she had a hopelessness and sense of being lost since leaving care, which was painfully evident. On the studio apartment floor was the futon mattress (without sheets), and there was little else--no pots, pans, or even a shower curtain.

Liz was dumbstruck and saddened by this enormous gap in services and the vast need that young people like Ashley have as they attempt to find their own way after a life in foster care. Gathering items from generous friends and scouring the web for donations, Liz began to piece together household goods for Ashley and other clients, and she saw what a tremendous difference it made in their lives. Yet, Liz knew that if all of their foster youth were to have a chance at success in this world, a larger effort would be needed.

This is how City Living NY was born. The decision to launch a non-profit organization was not one Liz took lightly. It was a plan that was formulated over many years of identifying what support was most valuable for clients one at a time. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but it had to be done.

The Organization: City Living NY

City Living NY (CLNY) is a comprehensive and innovative program that empowers youth aging out of foster care in New York City. Their mission is to empower youth aging out of foster care to successfully transition into adulthood by providing concrete resources, tools, and support services. A primary goal for CLNY is to reduce homelessness among foster youth by helping them establish and maintain housing stability.

Housing: In their first four years, CLNY has worked with 109 young people to set up their homes and supported them in working toward their educational, employment, and socio-emotional goals, all of which enable them to maintain housing stability. Today, 100% of CLNY's active clients remain in their homes.

Education: CLNY assists young people with education needs, helping college youth with tuition issues, internship guidance and re-enrollment challenges. For their non-college enrolled youth, they make referrals to appropriate GED programs and help them plan for the future.

Employment: On the career front, CLNY assists youth with resume writing and job searches, career counseling, and interview readiness. Many of their youth have gained employment because of these efforts.

Mental Health: CLNY provides youth with mental health referrals and provide supportive and crisis counseling as needed.

Life Skills: They host a variety of workshops to help their youth succeed, including classes on nutrition, budgeting/financial planning, wellness workshops, and assisting parents with skills and items to enable them to better care for their children.

Relationships: CLNY social workers maintain weekly contact with all young people to check in to ensure housing stability, progress toward goals, and overall emotional wellbeing.

Youth Participation Requirements:

To participate in City Living NY, youth must be 18-25 years old and aging out, or formerly in, foster care.

CLNY sometimes works with youth who have not yet aged out and are on a list to obtain housing. They help ensure the youth can secure housing in time to avoid a period of homelessness or "couch surfing."

CLNY can also be contacted by youth who have already aged out and are homeless or "couch surfing" (usually via referral from a current client). CLNY helps them find housing as well.

CLNY's Programs

CLNY has two major programs aimed to meet the varying needs of their clients. These are their Comprehensive Services Program (CSP) and their Home Goods Advocacy (HGA) program.

CLNY has been scaling up since its inception. Currently, they have 54 Comprehensive Services Program clients and 36 Home Goods Advocacy clients, for a total of 90 active youth. They also have 6 alumni and 13 closed for a total of 109 youth served since the organization began. They will continue to scale and increase their capacity in the coming years. Their growth is managed thoughtfully and carefully to assure that they are providing a truly impactful and holistic program for youth in these critical years from 18 through 26. CLNY remains close to alumni youth as well, and as the number of youth in this category grows, new supports may be put in place to meet the unique needs of these older young adults.



CLNY occupies a unique space in New York City. When they started their program, there were a few other programs with a particular focus for youth aging out of care, such as providing educational support, but no other program provided home goods or holistic support across a variety of needs. Since that time, other child welfare organizations – primarily foster care agencies – have begun to provide some services extending beyond the time youth age out of care. However, these services are directed to the youth that were in foster care with a specific agency and do not work with the youth long-term until age 26, as CLNY does.

Partnerships

As CLNY strives to connect their clients to needed services, their development has also consisted of partnership building and resource referrals. Since CLNY began to serve young people in 2016, they have made ongoing efforts to cultivate individual donors, corporations, and foundations. Below are several organizations with which they have developed a partnership:

- Community organizations such as The Mission Continues and Apartment Therapy in setting up their youths' apartments;
- In-kind and household goods donations from individuals and corporate sponsors like Avocado mattress, Macy's and Bob's Furniture;
- Companies such as Adobe and First Republic hold companywide home goods drives;
- The Fostering Connection and A Home Within – two mental health resources for foster youth;
- Room to Grow and Little Essentials – resources for young mothers;
- Kaplan Test Prep – free test preparation classes to any of their college youth; and
- First Republic National Bank and Chase Bank to host financial literacy and credit repair events.

They have also dramatically increased their funding partnerships and have received positive encouragement from several foundations and grantors inviting CLNY to apply. Critical support is received from the New York City Council who has funded CLNY through their Wrap-around Support for Transitional Aged Foster Youth initiative. City Council has supported CLNY for the last three years based on their success and growing positive reputation. These critical funds are applied to general operating expenses and their Comprehensive Services Program. CLNY has applied for a grant once again through this initiative for 2020.

CLNY also has developed several referral partnerships. Client referrals come from respected organizations such as The Legal Aid Society, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), ACS, New Yorkers for Children, Girls Educational & Mentoring Services (GEMS), and the youth themselves. CLNY also refers youth to other organizations doing good work for their population, such as those providing mental health services, job and training programs, financial literacy programs, or other programs they believe would benefit their youth further.

The Youth Experience

When foster care ends, CLNY's work begins. They begin their services when youth age out of care – typically at age 21 – to provide both short- and long-term support. They design a service plan based on each young person's unique needs and aspirations, empowering their clients to work towards stability and self-sufficiency. Below are the services offered in the two major CLNY programs.

Comprehensive Services Program (CSP)

In the Comprehensive Services Program (CSP), CLNY provides clients with urgently needed essential household goods (e.g., dishes, bedding, etc.) in order to meet their basic needs and begin turning each youth's first apartment into a home. CLNY social workers are assigned to maintain weekly contact with young people to ensure they remain stably housed, provide emotional support, and assist them with a variety of needs in the following areas:

Employment: CLNY staff meets with each youth to discuss and define both short- and long-term employment goals. They assist in career counseling, resume writing, and job searches. Youth can come to their office to print resumes and prepare for interviews. When a young person gains employment, CLNY will provide a metrocard to ensure the youth can maintain the job while awaiting the first paycheck.



Education: For college youth, CLNY assists with all the tasks the family unit traditionally handles. This includes applying for college, accessing financial aid, internship guidance, re-enrollment challenges, and even reviewing college papers. For non-college bound youth, CLNY locates internships, refers out to GED or appropriate vocational programs, and works on a plan to ensure success in the future.

Health: CLNY ensures all their clients have active insurance, makes referrals for mental health services, and assists in locating and accessing primary care physicians.

Life Skills: CLNY offers a variety of workshops to help youth on their path to adulthood. They ask for client input on trainings they wish to see. A few examples of these trainings include classes in budgeting, credit repair, nutrition, self-care, and goal setting. These workshops, while providing specific skills, also enable youth to learn from each other and create a support network.

Housing: CLNY ensures their clients are able to pay the rent, assists with budgeting when rent increases occur, and attends Housing Court if an eviction proceeding does occur. While 25% of former foster youth are homeless within three years of leaving care, 100% of CLNY's active clients remain in their homes.

Supportive Relationships: CLNY's social workers know the importance of creating a support structure that has stability and longevity for these youth who have already faced significant trauma and loss in their lives. The social worker becomes a trusted adult relationship that the young person can rely on, and the youth often reach out to seek advice for important decisions, when encountering failure, or when they don't know how to navigate a new situation.

Their social workers are trauma informed and experts at working with this population, and most importantly we truly believe that these young adults are incredible, inspiring, and capable of anything. To date, each of their clients remains with the same social worker they were assigned at intake, allowing long-lasting relationships to develop.

Home Goods Advocacy (HGA) Program



The Home Goods Advocacy program was designed to meet the needs of both the youth and their referral partners. CLNY collaborates with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to assist youth aged 18-21 who are still in foster care but living on their own. Assisting the youth in setting up their home is the first step in working with their young people and is crucial in forming the relationship that allows their future work together to succeed.

All CLNY partners are able to refer their clients to the HGA program, whether because the youth already has other supports in place or chooses to have less intensive involvement with any agency after years in care. With these clients, CLNY provides household goods, check-ins by phone quarterly to assess housing stability and invitations to their workshops and trainings where young people benefit from the peer community and the interactions that occur there.

In most cases, the referring agency staff provides the ongoing social work support for these youth that their comprehensive program would otherwise provide. The housing check-ins are designed to ensure that any issues that could impact housing stability are detected and can be addressed early. Many of these youth are able to transition into the Comprehensive Program once they turn 21 or as their needs change and capacity allows.

Youth who contact us in need of housing - sometimes bouncing between friends, sometimes already in the homeless shelters - can also join this program, and we assist them in applying for supportive housing and Section 8 vouchers from ACS.

When CLNY first meets with a youth in their apartment, they sit down with the youth to complete a Home Goods Evaluation to assess which items the young person needs. This form is broken down by room and facilitates a discussion about the various items people typically use in everyday life. After the evaluation is completed, an order is placed for the home goods and household items the young person needs. Each item is tracked in a spreadsheet, which includes a description of the item, quantity received, and the cost. When the home goods are delivered to the young person's home, a copy of this form (with the cost section redacted) is signed by the youth to confirm delivery of the items.

Staffing

Title	# of Positions	Details about Position
Founder & Executive Director	1	The Founder and Executive Director serves as the Executive Director of CLNY, managing the grants and day-to-day functions of the organization. The ED provides supervision and training for those Social Workers in the organization. This person also steps in to assist with the social work duties, as needed.
Social Worker	4	<p>The Social Workers fulfill a variety of duties:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve a caseload of young adults who have recently aged out of foster care. • Conduct intakes and assessments and identify each client's goals/needs. • Conduct assessment of physical home environment and assist youth in obtaining needed apartment goods and furniture through CLNY. • Conduct regular home and community visits with all clients. • Provide ongoing case management and supportive counseling, and crisis intervention as needed. • Provide referrals to appropriate outside agencies and organizations; accompany clients to appointments, as needed. • Advocates ensuring clients receive relevant entitlements and benefits. • Support young people in developing daily living skills, such as budgeting and managing their household. • Maintain detailed and up-to-date progress notes and relevant case documentation. • Complete reports and statistics needed for funders as directed by supervisor/Executive Director. • Attend agency and other meetings as needed. • Perform other duties as determined by supervisor/Executive Director.
Board of Directors	13	The Board of Directors is comprised of eight members, as well as a president, vice-president, two co-treasurers, and a secretary. These are voluntary positions.

Staff Training/Preparation

The founder and Executive Director of CLNY is an LMSW and has extensive experience developing and conducting trainings from her previous roles. She serves as the trainer for all incoming social workers for the organization, creating and leading many of the training sessions. All of the social workers are trauma informed and have experience working with this population. CLNY runs background checks on anyone who may interact with their clients on behalf of City Living NY, including board members.

Research Foundation

CLNY keeps up on the evidenced based best practices for working with youth who have experienced trauma, and any research, statistics, and outcomes related to the work they do. There is limited longitudinal research and outcome tracking based on interventions of the kind CLNY employs in this space, so they are recording and tracking the impact of their programs long-term, with the possibility of publishing results in the future.

Marketing

Because of the great need for their services in the New York area, CLNY does not need to market their services aggressively. They have partners that refer their own clients to CLNY. They also receive a large number of referrals from the youth they work with who know of other young people in similar dire circumstances. In fact, a third of their clients are referred by youth already in the program.

Efforts to increase their visibility include their recent television commercial created pro bono for CLNY through the JWT advertising agency's Young Commodores program, and a video created in partnership with Apartment Therapy and released across social media. CLNY was also chosen to be a part of Make a Mark, where a team of pro bono designers will create a social media toolkit that CLNY can use to increase their social media presence and attract new donors.



Measures of Program Success

CLNY sets program goals each quarter and year (which change based on funding sources):

- How many new youth they can take off their waitlist and place into their program;
- How many total active youth they can be supporting at the same time;
- How many youth remain in housing (their goal is always 100%); and
- How many youth are working or in school.

CLNY has developed several mechanisms to assure the efficacy of their programming, particularly for youth receiving their direct social work support. They track data to assure they are providing impactful services. At the end of 2019, in their Comprehensive Services Program, the results of the assessment showed:

- 100% of their clients remained in housing, despite 25% requiring a housing intervention to ensure stability;
- 81% were employed or attending an educational program;
- 76% were employed either part- or full-time;
- 30% were enrolled in college, 75% of whom CLNY assisted with an educational-related challenge during that six month assessment period;
- 28% graduated from their associates or bachelors program during their time working with CLNY; and
- In a client satisfaction survey also conducted at the end of 2019, 100% of respondents stated they would refer CLNY to a friend or relative.

Since the organization's inception, over 40% of their clients have needed some sort of housing intervention. While the overall statistics on former foster youth rates of homelessness are staggering, 100% of CLNY active clients currently remain in their apartments, although a large percentage of them have required assistance when facing a housing crisis that could have rendered them homeless without intervention.



CLNY also conducts an online, anonymous Client Satisfaction Survey at the close of every calendar year. This allows CLNY to assess the impact their program has on their youth's well-being and socioemotional health. It also gives their youth an opportunity to share ideas on how CLNY can improve, and what they would like to see from us the following year. The results of the survey completed in January 2019 showed:

- 100% would recommend CLNY to a friend;
- 94% could call their CLNY social worker for emotional support;
- 94% stated CLNY supports their educational/career goals;
- 94% felt more hopeful about the future;
- 94% were better equipped to handle stress and personal crisis;
- 88% had an adult they can rely on in times of future crisis;
- 82% were more comfortable living in their homes; and
- 76% were more comfortable managing their finances.

To ensure that CLNY continues to change and improve to address the unique needs of their youth, their program is regularly evaluated by the youth they serve. Regular trainings are conducted for social workers and certain board members.

Challenges

The value of the one-on-one social work time is incredible with this population. However, scaling it to serve many youth is definitely a challenge. CLNY has been able to gain efficiency and scale in many areas, but they need to secure funding to hire both part-time and full-time passionate, dedicated social workers to spend enough time building trust with youth in order to truly change outcomes. In the interim, they continue to direct almost all funding toward youth in need while there is still a waitlist.

Another challenge is lack of funding for full-time support staff such as administrative or financial team members. Currently much of this work is handled through the volunteer board. CLNY has continued to recruit engaged board members, all while continuing to fundraise.



Lessons Learned

Below are a few lessons that CLNY has learned since it began serving youth:

- Focus on fundraising and recruit board members with experience in fundraising.
- Partner early with other programs doing good work.
- Strong legal, payroll, and accounting advice is worth investment.
- Spend time setting up strong operational systems early.
- Data tracking is crucial.
- CLNY is most effective with youth who are motivated to seek help, including those who seek us out themselves (but they believe it can help a larger portion of the population).



L-R: Katt Sparks, MSW; Gabrielle Breslow, MSW; Young-In Shin, MSW; Liz Northcutt, MSW; Sarah Johnson, MSW; Jennifer Frias, MSW Intern



MISSION: AOI promotes resources and strategies that help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully.

VISION: To improve outcomes for youth aging out of care by identifying, sharing and encouraging the widespread use of effective strategies for helping foster youth transition to adulthood.

www.agingoutinstitute.org