

Tips When Considering Housing and Services

What is your son or daughter's vision for independent living? What is important to and for her or him, and how can you support your youth most effectively? Every young adult has different abilities and needs for support, and some parents will need to be more involved in this process than others. Many housing options and supports involve eligibility criteria, timelines, waiting lists, and limited availability to obtain services. One way to help your son or daughter find housing is to begin planning early, which will usually lead to better outcomes for everyone involved.

Shift your thinking and put your son or daughter in the driver's seat.

As parents, you are usually the primary decision makers for our children. Now is a good time to see your child as part of the larger community and to put your young adult in the driver's seat so that they are at the center of the planning process. That's where the term *person-centered thinking and planning* comes from. *Person-centered thinking and planning* is a process that is driven by the unique likes and dislikes of the person involved — your son or daughter — and his or her family. What are your son or daughter's unique hopes and dreams? Where does she like to go, what does she like to do, and who does she like to be with? What rituals and routines are important to her as well as for her, for the sake of health and safety? How would she like to be supported? These questions encourage person-centered thinking.

Know what your son or daughter's support needs are.

You will need to assess your child's skills to live in a home of his or her own. How much assistance does your son or daughter require on a daily basis? What are the essential supports, strategies, and accommodations? Can your young adult perform daily tasks — things like dressing, bathing, cooking, and daily organization — without assistance, with some assistance, or complete assistance? Does he or she need help to stay on task, with behavior or with communication? Knowing your son or daughter's support needs is key when determining the level of support services that will be required for your child to live as independently as possible outside the family home.

Talk to your son or daughter about where they want to live.

Is it important that your son or daughter live close to family and friends in familiar surroundings? For some, the people and relationships they have in their communities are very important and may serve as "natural (unpaid) supports." Friends, neighbors, acquaintances, store owners, teachers, and coaches have shared experiences and memories for your son or daughter that may provide a sense of what "home" means. Is it important for your young adult to move away to meet their needs such as

living near favorite places, activities, and friends, or having better access to transportation? Some young adults thrive on change and moving away from the family home and community is important for them to foster a sense of independence.

Explore housing options with your son or daughter.

Would your daughter like to live in an apartment, condominium, or townhome? Would your son prefer to live in a single family home? As you visit the homes of friends, family, and relatives, point out the differences between the types of housing. What are your youth's environmental needs for physical space, design, and accessibility? The availability of housing, locations she desires, and the possible need to share the cost of housing with a roommate will begin shaping your youth's housing plan. Does your son or daughter (or your family) have enough income to purchase a home, or rent from a family member? Be realistic in your conversations. For some families, cost will be a significant factor in housing choices. It will take time, energy and creativity to come up with a plan that fits your son or daughter's individual needs.

Think about how your son or daughter will pay for housing and services.

How will your son or daughter pay for rent or a mortgage, personal needs, and food? Is she currently working or does she have job experiences through school programs or volunteering that can lead to employment? Despite the fact that your youth has a disability, he or she will not automatically qualify to receive funding for housing and services and must meet eligibility criteria set by federal and state government. There are two categories of funding assistance for housing and services: Funding for the "shelter" or "housing option," and funding for "supports" or "services." Funding sources include such government benefit programs as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medical Assistance (MA), and state and county social services programs.

Talk to your son or daughter about having a roommate.

The choice to have a roommate is an individual one and some young people would prefer to live alone. Due to rising rental costs and the limited availability of affordable housing, your son or daughter may need to consider sharing expenses with a roommate. Does your son or daughter have friends or acquaintances who could be a good match? Talk to your young adult about what is important to and for them in considering a roommate and discuss a variety of topics: appropriate boundaries, sensory and environmental issues such as noise or allergies, early risers versus night owls, and issues of cleanliness.

Network with others to expand your son or daughter's community connections.

What are your son or daughter's hobbies and interests? Does she like sports, games, music, or dancing? Does she have friends who share these interests? What places — coffee shops, religious gathering places, a health club, or grocery store for example — does your family visit regularly? Is your son or daughter involved in volunteer activities? Community connections are important and can build natural supports your child may need.

Think about what your son or daughter's needs are for direct support staff.

Individuals who directly support your son or daughter are called "Direct Support Professionals" or DSPs. They can play a vital role in your child's life by helping with a wide range of daily activities and interactions with friends, employment, healthcare and physical care, skill development, and more. Direct Support Professionals can also help facilitate connections to people, resources, and experiences. What key skills

does your child's Direct Support Professional need? What personality traits are important? Is it important that the person be of the same culture, speak a language other than English, or know sign language? It is critical to take the time to consider how your son or daughter wants and needs to be supported.

Consider your son or daughter's transportation needs.

The freedom to go where you want, when you want, is something most of us desire. Reliable, cost-effective, accessible transportation is vital for your son or daughter to participate in the community and have access to employment, housing, education, and social connections. What are your son or daughter's needs for transportation? Is she able to drive? Can he afford to purchase and maintain a vehicle? Does he or she need to live close to work, school, or recreational activities? What are your child's accessibility challenges? Considering transportation needs can be a meaningful factor in attaining the goals in your son or daughter's plan for independent living.

Begin to research housing resources, visit housing fairs and attend workshops.

To learn about housing and services in your area, you can research online resources available from state and local human services departments, advocacy organizations, and disability resource and referral organizations. Attend workshops and fairs, such as PACER's Housing Fair, that address this topic, and connect with other parents and young adults exploring housing options and services. Once you have identified important person-centered needs for your son or daughter — what is important to, for and how to best support them — you'll be able to create a one-page profile that can serve as a guide when you speak to housing professionals.

By learning as much as possible about resources and options you can help your son or daughter explore their vision for independent living, housing and services. Most young adults will need help while they are learning the skills needed to develop independence.