Launchpads Learnings

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Freedom Forward is a nonprofit organization working to prevent the commercial sexual exploitation of youth in San Francisco by transforming systems that too often contribute to their abuse. We are committed to improving systems such as the foster care system and juvenile justice system that often intersect with commercial sexual exploitation by bringing new ideas, funding, and resources to the space. We are a community that takes risks in pursuit of a better future for the youth we support, with the conviction that changing the status quo requires bold steps. As part of our guiding principles, we focus on fostering thoughtful innovation, including sharing our learning openly, even (and perhaps most importantly) the initiatives that did not go according to plan.

This report discusses Launchpads, a project that attempted to build an online housing platform where youth in extended foster care could find rooms for rent in the home of community members. This report discusses the journey of this pilot program, including learnings and areas for improvement. It also includes valuable takeaways that could help inform others looking to bring similar aid and resources to the foster care housing space.

REPORT CONTEXT

Why We Share

In the social sector, we're conditioned to omit failures. In doing that, we neglect to fail forward and share learnings widely, wasting resources like capital, time, and talent on hiding and repackaging results. We believe deeply in our responsibility to be transparent and share what we've learned in the past two years and why we believe this project ultimately didn't take off.

Acknowledging Our Biases

We're writing this report with the knowledge of what ultimately occurred on this project. From this vantage point, it feels easy to identify things we missed the first time around. At the same time, when looking at something in hindsight, it is also possible to make meaning of things that did not stand out when working on the project in real time because they fit into the narrative we now understand. We have done our best to share accurately, but ultimately this will never be a fully unbiased retelling.

LAUNCHPADS ORIGIN STORY

When Launchpads was created, one thing was clear: Young people in Extended Foster Care (EFC) were vulnerable to housing insecurity and it was not uncommon for youth to move frequently during their three years in EFC. At Tipping Point Community, a grant-making organization that had recently launched an initiative to end chronic homelessness in San Francisco, a team was doing work to find new strategies to address housing insecurity given that the traditional market wasn't providing housing options for many communities in San Francisco. During this time, one young person said "I rent a room in the home of an old lady in Sonoma County. Maybe there are other nice people who want to help young people out." Inspired by the idea that there may be other people who would be willing to rent to young people in our community, Tipping Point felt that, while risky, it was worth trying in pursuit of offering more housing to people who needed it. Freedom Forward was approached after this initial focus group.

> In San Francisco, approximately 20-30% of the almost 200 youth eligible for a SILP cannot identify a potential placement for themselves, which in turn, can lead to housing instability and homelessness for a group of youth who have a legal entitlement to housing between the ages of 18-21.

Tipping Point Communities

Defining the challenge

Summer 2019

In Tipping Point's request for funding presented to their board, they analyzed the problem noting that:

"Although Assembly Bill 12 passed in 2012, allowing thousands of youth in California to opt-into Extended Foster Care until the age of 21, the responsibility to find housing has landed squarely on the shoulders of the youth. Youth electing to participate in the most independent opportunity within Extended Foster Care, known as a Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP), must identify an appropriate placement that can be approved by their social worker. Due to frequent movement within the system and traumas associated with removal from families, many of these youth lack the connections, relationships, or social capital that benefit their non-foster peers. In San Francisco, approximately 20-30% of the almost 200 youth eligible for a SILP cannot identify a potential placement for themselves, which in turn, can lead to housing instability and homelessness for a group of youth who have a legal entitlement to housing between the ages of 18-21."

The solution Tipping Point suggested:

"Collaborating with Freedom Forward and the SF Department of Family and Children's Services to pilot a housing technology platform and program which will become the housing solution these youth need in order to find and access safe, appropriate placements for their SILP. Launchpads, the housing tech platform, matched with staffing and programming, will contribute the following:

- *Development of a website and mobile app to facilitate the matching of hosts and youth*
- *Identification, recruitment, and vetting of potential hosts*
- *Coordination and increased accountability of county social workers and non-profit service providers*
- *Expansion and improvement of existing ancillary funding opportunities for youth in EFC, which will help to provide move-in assistance (security deposits, transportation, furniture, and other assistance) and bridge funding between move-in and the youth's first subsidy check"*

The concept was given to Freedom Forward in July of 2019 with a budget of $500,000 to support developing the program and technology, housing 50 youth using this technology over three years, and assessing the feasibility of scaling the app to serve other counties in the future.
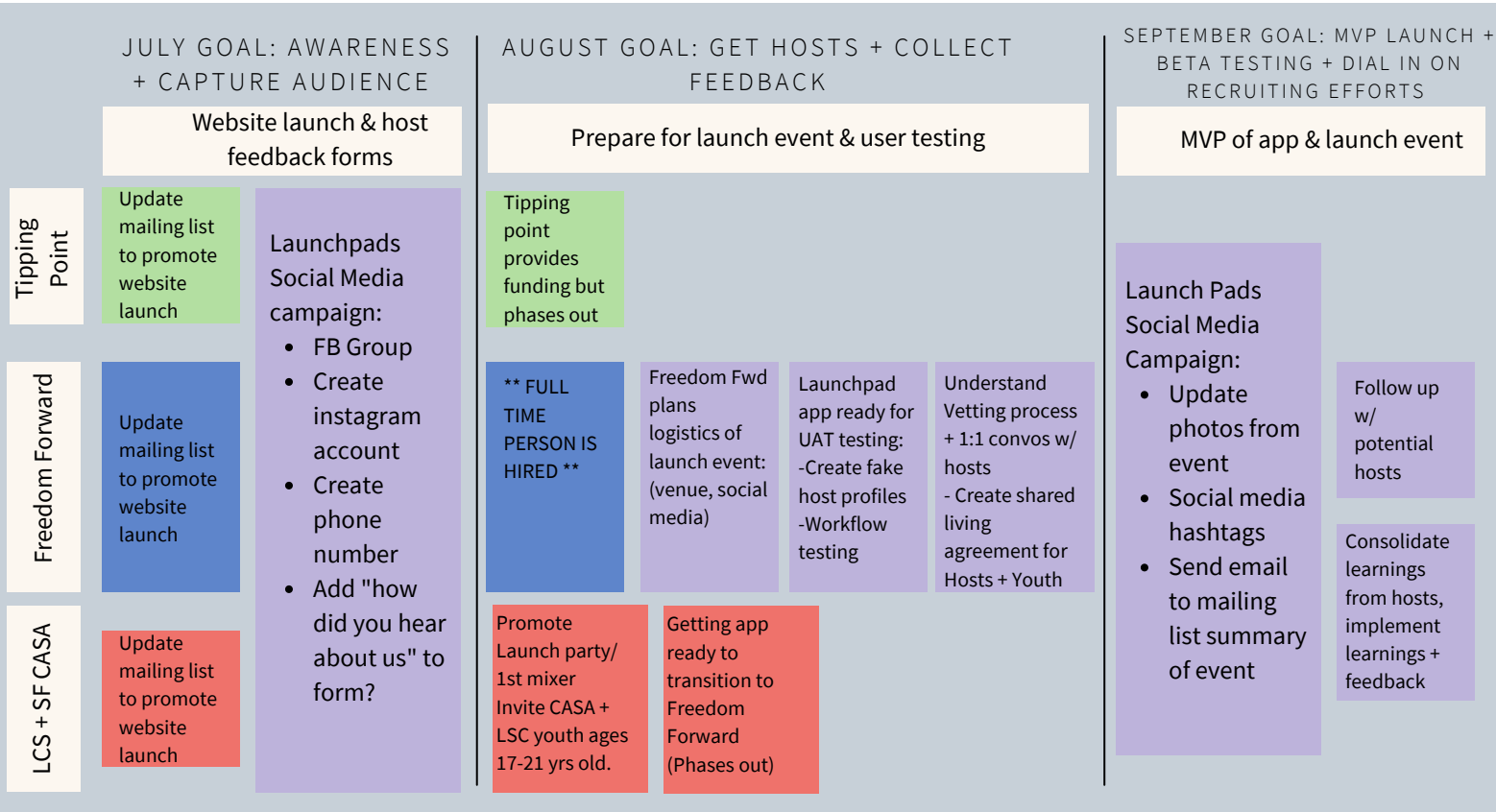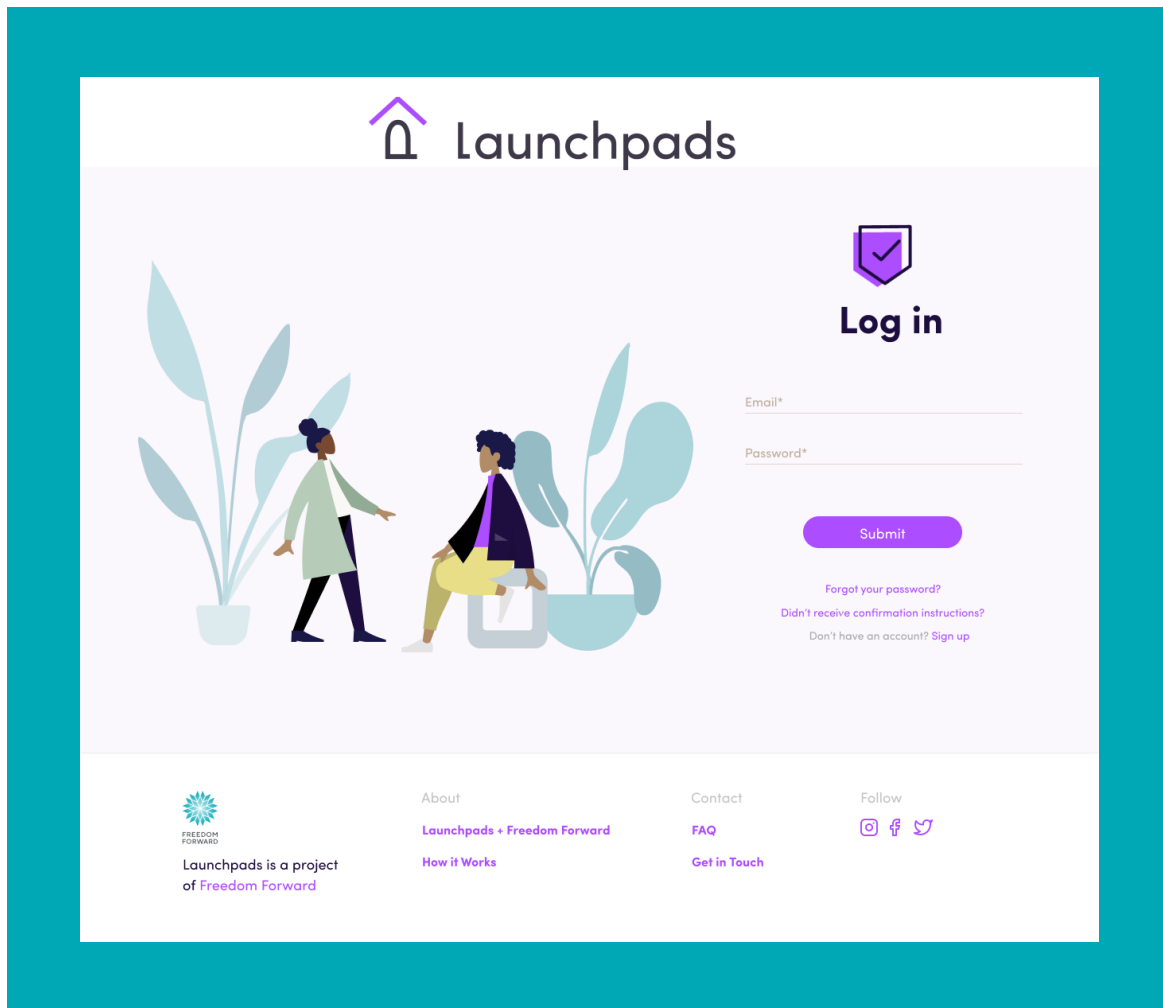
WHAT WE LEARNED

Lessons from Launchpads

Allot more time than you think you need

Tipping Point and Freedom Forward discussed a planning period of just three months from when funds were released to when the app and program were supposed to go live. In reality, it took significantly longer to actualize the Launchpads app and program. There were legal hang ups, scheduling delays, and hiring problems, among other delays. The lesson here is working within realistic parameters helps promote positive morale and sets teams up for success.

In the case of Launchpads, a three-month timeline to launch was not realistic, especially when there was only one designated staff member assigned to the project, and that person had not yet been hired. Funders and non-profits should try and balance the desire to push out projects quickly with the reality that good work requires planning and time.

Original Launchpads timeline

	JULY GOAL: AWARENESS + CAPTURE AUDIENCE	AUGUST GOAL: GET HOSTS + COLLECT FEEDBACK	SEPTEMBER GOAL: MVP LAUNCH + BETA TESTING + DIAL IN ON RECRUITING EFFORTS
	Website launch & host feedback forms	Prepare for launch event & user testing	MVP of app & launch event
Tipping Point	Update mailing list to promote website launch	Tipping point provides funding but phases out	
Freedom Forward	Update mailing list to promote website launch	Launchpads Social Media campaign: • FB Group • Create instagram account • Create phone number • Add "how did you hear about us" to form?	** FULL TIME PERSON IS HIRED ** / Freedom Fwd plans logistics of launch event: (venue, social media) / Launchpad app ready for UAT testing: -Create fake host profiles -Workflow testing / Understand Vetting process + 1:1 convos w/ hosts - Create shared living agreement for Hosts + Youth	Launch Pads Social Media Campaign: • Update photos from event • Social media hashtags • Send email to mailing list summary of event / Follow up w/ potential hosts / Consolidate learnings from hosts, implement learnings + feedback
LCS + SF CASA	Update mailing list to promote website launch	Promote Launch party/ 1st mixer Invite CASA + LSC youth ages 17-21 yrs old. / Getting app ready to transition to Freedom Forward (Phases out)	

Listening > Forcing a solution

When innovating, it's valuable to test out hypotheses before embarking on a project. Focus groups can provide this testing ground. Focus groups should be large enough to offer good representation, and should share characteristics with the target group. It's imperative that as practitioners, we listen deeply: this is the moment where it's easiest, quickest, and cheapest to fail.

In the case of Launchpads, two sets of focus groups were conducted. One was completed by California Youth Connection (CYC), a youth-led organization, developing leaders who transform the foster care system, on behalf of Tipping Point.

The other was done jointly by Tipping Point, Freedom Forward, and Elefint Design. We do not have documentation for focus groups completed by CYC, however we were able to reach one professional who was present during the focus groups. This person's impression was that young people thought the idea of an online host-home platform that allowed youth in extended foster care to rent rooms in the homes of community members was a worthy one, but that most of the young people were reluctant to say they would actually use the service. Instead, many were more interested in living with roommates. This group was composed of young people who were in the foster care system, or who had been in foster care.

The second set of focus groups completed by Tipping Point, Freedom Forward, and Elefint Design included six young people, three of whom had actually been in foster care and all of whom had experienced housing insecurity at various points in time. Looking back at the notes several themes emerge, which included:

- Feeling that if they were to rent from someone who they lived with, the power dynamic would make them feel uncomfortable
- Wanting to live alone
- Not wanting to follow rules
- Wanting to live with people close to their own age

These comments were an opportunity for our team to question the premise of the proposed project, even when youth expressed interest in the idea, conceptually.

When speaking with professionals who were present at the second focus groups, they noted that they felt discouraged because the focus groups did not indicate that the concept was one young people were attracted to, but they were able to "explain away" some of their concerns by identifying how the young people in the focus groups were different from the population the project was actually going to serve (e.g., some youth were not foster youth, some were not from San Francisco County where housing is extremely expensive, etc). They also knew that the housing market in San Francisco was the most expensive in the nation. We allowed youth's need for housing to drive our pursuit of the project, rather than what they wanted for housing.

Complete a thorough analysis of the existing ecosystem

When we embarked on Launchpads, we wanted to move quickly, and believed we could build on top of a landscape analysis we had done for a project in a similar space. We were familiar with foster care and housing within foster care, so we neglected to dig deeper into the world of housing to fully understand the offerings. In doing so, we missed two big things:

(1) First, we believed that there weren't other host homes programs serving this population in San Francisco. We later learned that there was at least one other host home program in San Francisco (aimed at slightly older youth), and that the program was struggling to attract interested young people. We learned this a year after beginning our work with San Francisco Child Welfare. Relatedly, Alameda County, a neighboring Bay Area county, also has a host home program and similarly, reports that young people are not interested in host home beds.

(2) Second, while we knew many young people were housed through Transitional Housing Programs (THPs), we didn't realize that young people received a stipend if they lived in THPs that ranged from $400-500. This crucial information would have helped us set the price of rooms on our platform in order to be more attractive to youth.

HOSTS

YOUTH
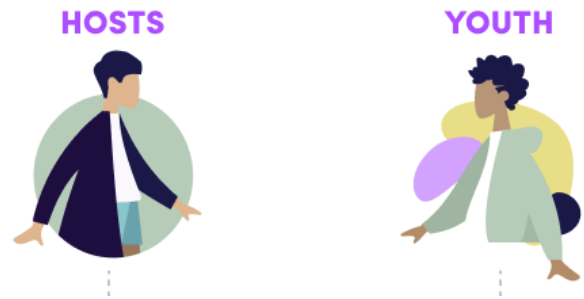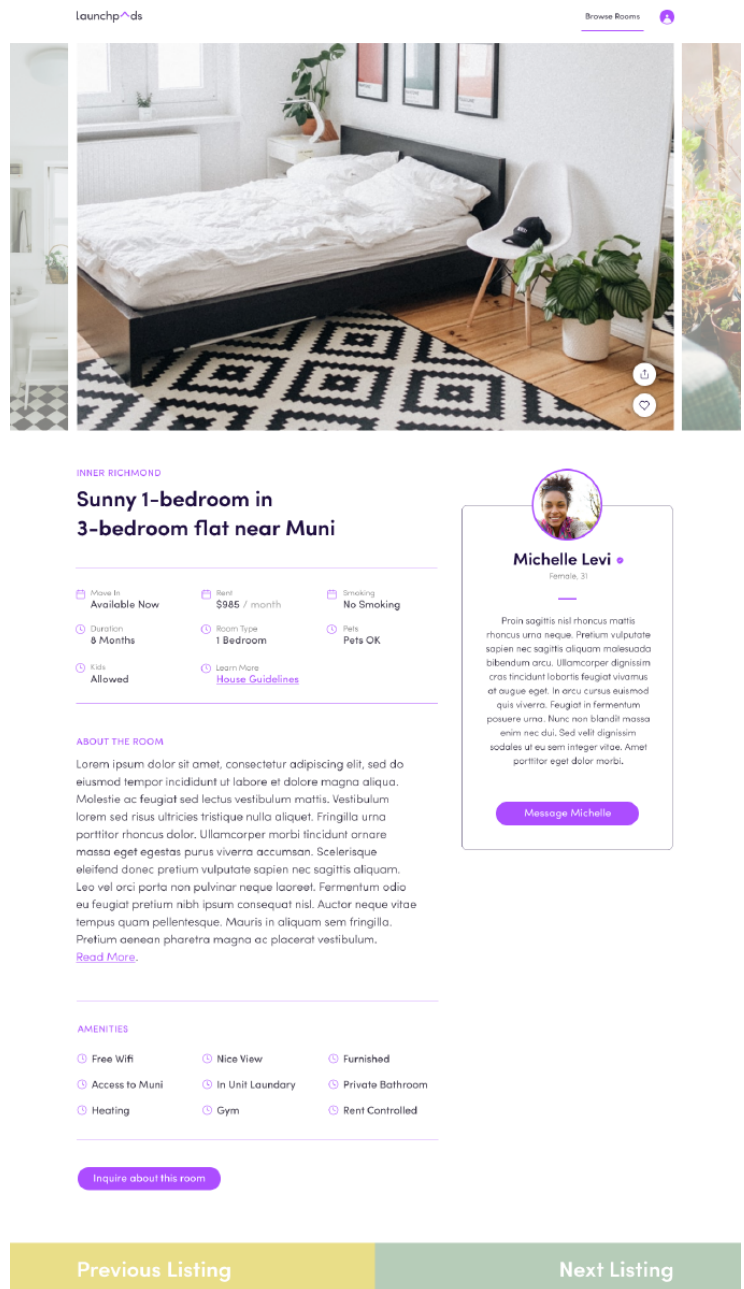
For young people who didn't want to live in THPs, they had two chief complaints: First, they didn't want to participate in lots of programming. Many THP programs have weekly check-ins with a case worker and other mandatory activities. Second, THPs tend to have strict rules. While we could offer a program with very minimal programming, we relied on hosts to set rules and ultimately most hosts had rules that looked similar to THPs. Additionally, our hosts were not pricing rooms at a rate that would be competitive with what youth could take home through THPs, and we did not give them information that would have allowed for this. Because of this, our program wasn't actually filling a gap, but instead offering further options for the young people who were doing ok with the current housing options.

Rely on a minimum viable product, rather than building everything all at once

The original vision for the project was an online platform that allowed youth to rent rooms in the homes of community members. Many of the original collaborators agreed that it might make most sense to begin the project without the app, get proof-of-concept regarding room rentals in people's homes, and then to build the technology product after additional feedback. Instead, a volunteer development team stepped forward to build the app for free early in the project. We decided to make use of this unbelievably generous offer as a beta product.

When COVID started soon into the project, the development team lost capacity to continue their pro bono work. There were conflicting opinions among the stakeholders about prioritizing technology development for this program- some involved thought we should launch without an app, while others wanted to push forward with the app. Had we tried a non-tech solution first to test our hypothesis around youth wanting affordable housing and being excited about host homes, this could have started as a program that relied on a binder with host profiles that youth could look through. This would have allowed us to gauge youth interest in renting from strangers. However, as we all met, we also had a hypothesis that technology would lend credibility to our program - not only with funders and social workers but also with youth who are highly connected to the digital world. Running the MVP (minimum viable product) version of this project without technology would not have tested whether the technology itself increased people's buy-in to the program.

Developing technology to support your work requires significant time and investment

The idea of using technology to facilitate projects in the social services space is alluring, and at times can be an asset that saves time and improves systems. However, we cannot understate the reality that building an online application from scratch is time consuming and can be expensive. Furthermore, the process of developing technology is likely to be iterative, meaning that costs will be ongoing. A few key take-aways that we have for first time tech builders:

App design and app development are not the same

Consider designing applications and building applications two different functions (and costs), unless you hire a firm that does both.

If you do not have technical expertise on your team, find some advisors

When soliciting bids to build your application, firms may suggest different approaches and time considerations. For example, one firm may suggest using WordPress to build your application while another might suggest that a custom-built product is the way to go. If you do not have technical expertise on your team, it will be valuable to have trusted advisors who can help you evaluate different proposals. They can help you make decisions about when it makes sense to use "off-the-shelf" products vs. more-expensive custom-built products and what may serve you better in the long-term.

Make sure your contractors have the relevant insurance and licenses

Beyond simply choosing the firm that best meets your needs, it can be important to ensure that the firm you choose has the appropriate insurance and business licensure. If they do not, this may cause delays while they address these issues.

It's all in the details

If you are outsourcing the production of your online application, you should expect to have to lay out the functionality of your application in a very detailed way. It may also force you to adjust your original expectations as you determine what fits within the project budget.

Line up testers

Most organizations don't have endless people around to test out their app. Having a group of dedicated volunteers and testers will support finding all of the problems with your app when you go live. If your testers aren't experienced with testing online applications it will be useful to write out very specific testing instructions and offer clear and easy ways for them to give feedback. This is made more complicated by the number of different user types (e.g., program participant, host, social worker, administrator). Once you get enough users to test the application, cataloging and organizing these changes can also be very time consuming, and you may need to choose which changes to prioritize based on timeline, budget, and other factors.

Budget time and money for testing and improvements

Required changes may include a combination of technical bugs, elements of the application that aren't working in a way that is intuitive to users, and items that your team did not lay out as specifically as needed for the technical consultants to build. Depending on what caused a given error, you may need to pay more to address the necessary change. Budgeting for changes will be beneficial to your team.

Don't forget to get legal advice

There are legal requirements put in place by the Federal Communication Commission for online businesses/applications. Getting legal advice on what disclosures and authorizations you need to provide to users will be beneficial in finalizing your app.

These are some of the things we learned when building Launchpads, but if you are thinking of building a tech product, the place to begin is by asking whether the project would be almost as good without technology.

A room can be the difference.

If something is slowing a project down, paying to speed it up makes sense

Having contingency funds allows new projects to pay for expertise that will move projects forward faster, rather than counting exclusively on pro-bono expertise. It can feel scary to spend funds, given that in the non-profit sector often we're working in a resource scarce environment, but paying for support allows teams to actualize their projects and move forward quickly.

Build low barriers to signing up to get involved and follow up with interested parties quickly

When building new programs, create low barriers for people to learn more, and create opportunities to make personal connections with interested people. When we built Launchpads, we looked at models for how to connect with prospective hosts. Some programs did one-on-one calls with people, some did monthly info sessions, and some asked that prospective hosts fill out an interest form or application. We wanted people to be able to do something easy that we could follow up on quickly. We opted for weekly info sessions, rather than personal calls, because attending an info session inherently feels lower stakes than a one-on-one call, which meant we could capture a broader audience. We also made sure to have info sessions scheduled frequently, and have them scheduled six to eight weeks into the future with the assumptions that (a) people might need flexibility over when they could attend an info session; (b) the sooner they could get to an info session, the more likely we'd capture them in their moment of interest. After talking to individuals within the sales/marketing space, we are confident that our conversion rate is one to be proud of, thus we'd repeat much of our strategy if we were to work on a similar program again.

When building a program where you have to find people to offer services and people who want to receive those services, finding equilibrium can be challenging

Launchpads was a challenging project because we needed to build a pipeline of interested hosts and interested youth to match each other at the same time. Then, once we had an interested host or youth, they needed to be compatible in many different ways. For example, they needed to like one another, the location needed to work for the youth, the host needed to have rules that the youth was willing to agree on, the rent needed to be affordable for the youth, and so forth. While we had concerns about building out a supply of hosts, we did not fully consider what demand would be like (youth) because we were so certain that youth needed housing. Our take away is that creating more options for people is only good if the options created are those that people are interested in.

Our project experienced significant delays, with the biggest delay being getting an agreement signed with the City and County of San Francisco. This meant that although we started recruiting hosts in July of 2020, we weren't able to tell youth we were "open for business" until March of 2021. During this time, we recruited many hosts; however, the unexpected and long delay understandably caused a significant number of hosts to drop out of the program. It was a reminder to us that finding interested youth was as important as finding interested hosts. Beyond this, COVID-19 had an impact on people's preferences and risk profiles in that timeline.

We purposefully limited our recruitment of youth because we didn't want Launchpads inundated with young people when we had fewer than ten homes. When we did finally launch, youth were very, very slow to join the site. Our primary referral source was social workers, who unfortunately are overtaxed. This should have led us to the realization that we might need a more diverse strategy for recruiting youth. After several months of waiting, we cast a wider net, presenting directly to young people through the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) and going to other foster care serving organizations for referrals, however we still failed to attract significant youth interest.

> **Creating more options for people is only really good if you're creating options that people are interested in.**

Be brave enough to pivot when you realize your initiative isn't serving its goal

Pressing "stop" is difficult when you have dedicated significant time, money, and energy to a project. For Freedom Forward, the North Star is meeting youth needs in a way that also improves the system overall and ultimately prevents exploitation from taking place.

Over the course of nine months, as we struggled to attract youth to our platform, hosts continued to drop out, and our platform dwindled to just a few homes. While we were working to attract additional hosts, we began to ask if the model could truly meet youths' needs and continually generate a user pool that would create relevant housing options for youth, and a relevant set of renters for hosts. We set several benchmarks and gave ourselves three months to meet those goals. Our goals centered on host recruitment in areas youth wanted to live (namely IN San Francisco, and as close to BART (our subway system - as possible), attracting youth to the app, and getting youth to message hosts (indicating general interest). We decided that if we couldn't meet these benchmarks we would begin the process of closing down Launchpads. It was a difficult and painful choice to make, but ultimately we weren't meeting youth needs so we felt it would be better to expend energy in other ways. We did make the decision to close down Launchpads, and contacted our hosts to connect them to other community providers where their generosity could be utilized.

CONCLUSION

There were many takeaways from the past two years when we looked back and reexamined our work. We relearned that complex projects require significant planning and incubation time. We learned that we must always listen deeply, and practice non-attachment. This will help us let go of ideas we think are great in pursuit of ideas that those we are trying to serve actually believe in and want. We learned that although we may feel we know a product landscape, it's worth doing a deeper dive. We were reminded that it is always cheapest to start with a minimum viable product, then add on to keep enticing more users to join. We learned that when we ask, our community is there to help us.

In spite of the fact that we weren't able to actualize this project in the way we hoped, there are moments we're proud of. We built out networks of support that attracted many hosts; We looked for opportunities to iterate within the project, so that we could continue to be as user-friendly as possible; and we, along with our Child Welfare partner, were able to project a future vision for how youth should access housing that centers youth-choice, their living preferences, and their autonomy.

We are deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to try something bold and to have spent our time chipping away at the massive housing and homelessness crisis in our region. While we wish we were writing Launchpads' success report, we are grateful for all we've learned along the way and to be living our values of sharing openly and practicing transparency. We hope other organizations and projects will benefit from our learnings, that we all continue to move forward with humility. Most of all, we recognize that we must continue to innovate and learn even beyond the boundaries and lifespan of Launchpads in order to truly address our community's most pressing problems.