

Lived Experiences of Youth in Palawan Bahay Pag-Asa Rehabilitation Center: Insights for Program Enhancement

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of youth in the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center and generated insights for enhancing its existing rehabilitation program. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed with fifteen purposively selected youth residents who had direct experience of the rehabilitation process. Data were gathered through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews using a validated semi-structured interview guide and were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The findings showed a gradual transition from initial fear, uncertainty, homesickness, and prison-like expectations toward adjustment, more positive perceptions of the center, and personal and behavioral development. Major challenges included family separation, adjustment to institutional rules and routines, interpersonal conflict

and peer influence, restricted movement, and continuing emotional self-regulation. Informants coped through productive, academic, recreational, creative, reflective, spiritual, and problem-solving activities, together with support from family members, peers, staff, and social workers. Support was multidimensional and included guidance and counseling, practical care, legal and educational assistance, psychosocial services, family involvement, peer relationships, spiritual activities, and basic-needs support. Based on these findings, Project Bahay Kalinga was developed to strengthen intake and adjustment support, technical-vocational opportunities, physical facilities and living conditions, family involvement and reconciliation, and inclusive psychosocial, values-oriented, and spiritual support. The study concludes that youth rehabilitation is an individualized and multidimensional process requiring coordinated institutional, family, educational, psychosocial, developmental, and community support to promote personal growth and successful reintegration.

Keywords: *Bahay Pag-asa, children in conflict with the law, lived experiences, phenomenology, youth rehabilitation, youth reintegration*

INTRODUCTION

Bahay Pag-asa centers are residential child-caring facilities established within the Philippine juvenile justice system to provide intervention, rehabilitation, and reintegration services for children in conflict with the law (CICL). Republic Act No. 9344, as amended by Republic Act No. 10630, shifted the response to juvenile offending toward restorative, child-sensitive, and developmentally appropriate measures, while national guidelines position Bahay Pag-asa as a setting for psychosocial support, education, values formation, life-skills development, and family reintegration (Department of Social Welfare and Development [DSWD], 2015; Republic Act No. 9344, 2006; Republic Act No. 10630, 2013). In this context, the quality of rehabilitation depends not only on the formal services available but also on how youth experience institutional life, relationships, structure, support, and opportunities for change.

International evidence similarly favors rehabilitative approaches that respond to developmental needs rather than relying on punishment alone. Research has emphasized therapeutic interventions, restorative justice, evidence-based psychosocial treatment, and community-based alternatives as important elements of youth justice practice (Kimbrell et al., 2023; Labriola et al., 2024; McCart et al., 2023; Young et al., 2017). Meta-syntheses of juvenile correctional experiences also indicate that rehabilitation is shaped by the interaction between institutional conditions, relationships, treatment experiences, and opportunities for reintegration (Sankofa et al., 2018).

Philippine literature has documented that CICL often enter the justice system with complex family, social, and community circumstances, and that institutional responses must remain rights-based and sensitive to individual needs (Bañaga, 2004; Palomares, 2018; Rendaje et al., 2024). Recent qualitative work also underscores that the perspectives of reformed youth can illuminate the processes through which rehabilitation, reflection, and social relationships contribute to change (Solmayor & Embornas, 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of understanding the rehabilitation process from the standpoint of the youth themselves rather than relying only on program records or administrative indicators.

In Palawan, the Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center provides a local setting in which youth experience structured care, education, counseling, activities, and preparation for reintegration. Yet the thesis identified a gap in localized evidence concerning how residents themselves interpret their admission, daily routines, challenges, coping strategies, and support systems. A phenomenological inquiry is especially suited to this gap because it seeks the meanings people attribute to experiences they have lived through (Van Manen, 2016).

Accordingly, this study explored the lived experiences of youth in the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center and used their narratives to generate insights for program enhancement. It examined how the informants described their stay in the center, the challenges they encountered during rehabilitation, the coping mechanisms they employed, and their perceptions of support from staff, social workers, and facilitators. The study further used the findings to develop Project Bahay Kalinga, an enhancement framework intended to strengthen the center's existing rehabilitation services.

Literature Review

Developmental and Restorative Approaches to Youth Rehabilitation

Juvenile rehabilitation is grounded in the principle that young people who become involved in offending behavior remain capable of development and change. Earlier work reaffirmed rehabilitation as a legitimate orientation in juvenile justice, while later evidence showed that effective interventions are more likely to succeed when they are structured, responsive to risk and need, and developmentally appropriate (Lipsey, 2009; Macallair, 1993). Within this perspective, the goal is not simply behavioral control during placement but the strengthening of competencies and conditions that support safer and more constructive participation in family and community life.

Contemporary evidence further supports restorative and therapeutic approaches. Kimbrell et al. (2023) reported evidence for restorative justice programs and practices as constructive responses within juvenile justice, while McCart et al. (2023) emphasized evidence-based psychosocial treatments for adolescents with disruptive behavior. Sankofa et al. (2018), through a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies, likewise highlighted treatment experiences and the broader correctional environment as central to understanding juvenile rehabilitation.

These perspectives are consistent with the Philippine juvenile justice framework. Republic Act No. 9344 and Republic Act No. 10630 emphasize diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration, while DSWD (2015) identifies psychosocial services, education, life-skills development, values formation, and family involvement as components of Bahay Pag-asa programming. Effective rehabilitation therefore requires a balance between structure and care, with interventions tailored to the developmental and psychosocial circumstances of individual youth.

Family, Peer, and Institutional Support in Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation occurs within a social environment. Supportive relationships with adults, family members, peers, and mentors can shape how youth understand rules, cope with emotional strain, and sustain motivation for change. Boering et al. (2024) highlighted the potential value of youth-initiated mentoring and supportive relationships for young people involved in delinquency, while Philippine accounts have emphasized the role of family circumstances, institutional relationships, and child-sensitive responses in the experiences of CICL (Bañaga, 2004; Palomares, 2018).

Family involvement is particularly important because residential placement separates young people from familiar sources of belonging and support. DSWD (2015) recognizes family involvement and reintegration as core rehabilitation concerns, and the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council (2020) similarly situates intervention within a broader system of case management and reintegration. The emotional effects of separation may continue even after a resident becomes accustomed to institutional routines, making communication, counseling, and preparation for reunification important throughout the rehabilitation period.

Peer and staff relationships can be both protective and challenging. Social interaction may expose residents to conflict or negative influence, but it can also provide friendship, guidance, modeling, and opportunities to practice self-control. A rights-based institutional environment therefore requires clear rules, consistent guidance, access to counseling, and meaningful activities that reduce the sense of punitive confinement. This balance is consistent with evidence that youth justice interventions are strengthened when social, welfare, therapeutic, and environmental factors are considered together (Young et al., 2017).

Education, Skills Development, and Reintegration

Education and skills development are important because rehabilitation must prepare youth for life beyond the residential setting. National Bahay Pag-asa guidelines include educational and developmental interventions, while broader juvenile justice research emphasizes the importance of programs that build competencies and address individual treatment needs (DSWD, 2015; Kinscherff, 2016). Structured schooling, life-skills activities, recreation, and productive tasks can provide routine, achievement, and opportunities for residents to experience themselves as capable learners rather than solely as justice-involved youth.

Reintegration also depends on opportunities outside the institution. Community-based alternatives and coordinated local supports can reduce unnecessary reliance on confinement and strengthen continuity between intervention and community life (Labriola et al., 2024). For residents approaching discharge, education, livelihood preparation, family relationships, and community linkages may therefore function together as practical foundations for reintegration.

The Philippine evidence reviewed in the thesis indicates that CICL experiences are shaped by family, peer, economic, and institutional conditions, suggesting that program enhancement should not focus on a single service. Studies from Philippine settings have documented the complexity of CICL circumstances and the value of rehabilitation that integrates behavioral, educational, relational, and reintegration needs (Palomares, 2018; Rendaje et al., 2024; Solmayor & Embornas, 2024). This supports an integrated approach in which technical-vocational preparation, psychosocial care, family engagement, and supportive institutional conditions are treated as complementary elements.

Phenomenological and Conceptual Foundations

The study approached rehabilitation as a lived experience rather than as a set of program outputs alone. Phenomenology seeks to understand the meanings individuals give to experiences they have lived through, making it appropriate for exploring fear, adjustment, belonging, conflict, coping, support, and personal change from the standpoint of residents themselves (Van Manen, 2016). The thesis further interpreted these experiences through Social Learning Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, using the social environment, modeled behavior, safety, belongingness, esteem, and personal growth as conceptual lenses for understanding adjustment and development.

The conceptual framework used an Input-Process-Output model supported by Republic Act No. 9344, Republic Act No. 10630, and the child-welfare orientation of Philippine juvenile justice. Inputs consisted of the informants' lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, perceptions of support, and suggestions for improvement. The process involved in-depth interviews, transcription, coding, and phenomenological thematic analysis. The outputs were the identified themes and a findings-based rehabilitation enhancement program, with feedback directed toward identified gaps, evidence-based recommendations, and reintegration planning.

Figure 1 Research Paradigm

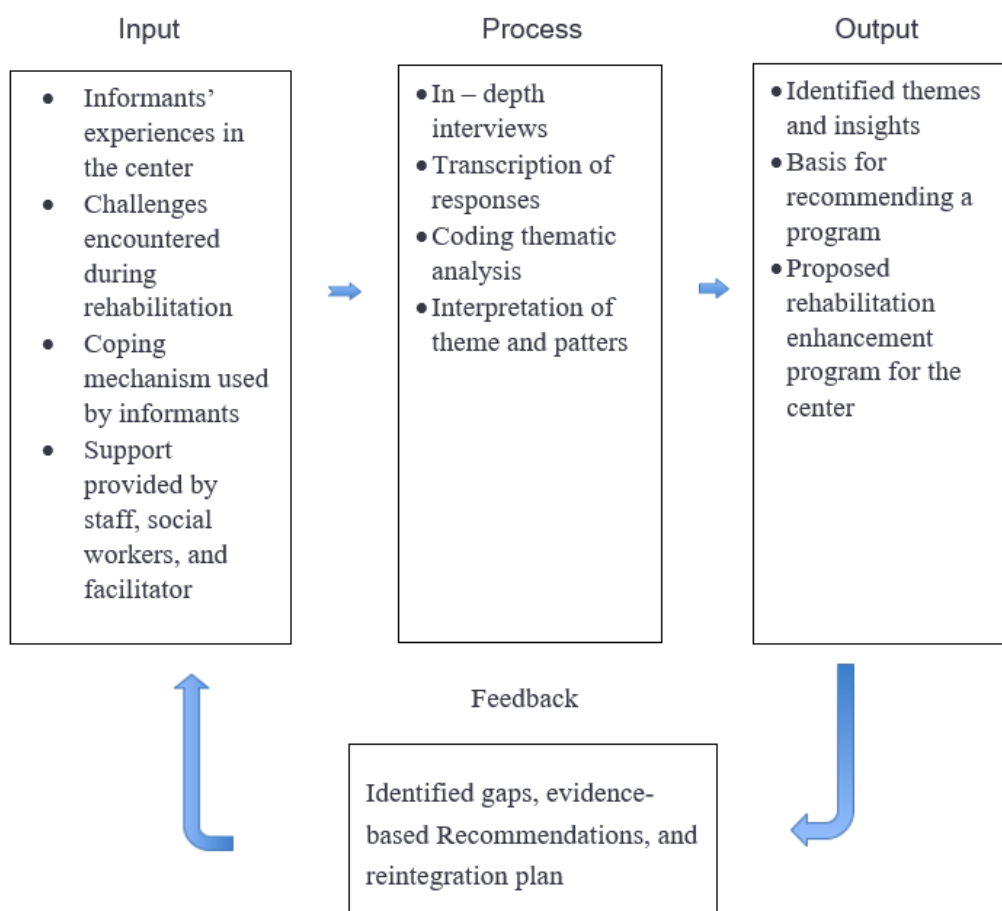


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study / Research Paradigm

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and describe the meanings that youth residents attached to their rehabilitation experiences in the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how the informants experienced their stay, challenges, coping mechanisms, and sources of support rather than on measuring variables or establishing causal relationships (Van Manen, 2016).

Research Locale

The study was conducted at the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines. The center is a residential facility that provides intervention, rehabilitation, and other support services to children in conflict with the law. It was selected because the youth residents had direct experience of the rehabilitation process and could provide context-specific accounts of institutional life, challenges, coping, support, and program needs.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Fifteen youth residents who were undergoing rehabilitation and intervention at the time of data gathering served as informants. They ranged from 15 to 26 years old at the time of interview; some had entered the center as minors and later reached the age of majority while still under appropriate rehabilitation or case disposition. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich informants with direct experience of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion required residence in the center, sufficient experience of the rehabilitation process, willingness and ability to participate, and the required consent or assent. The final sample was guided by data saturation, reached when succeeding interviews no longer generated substantially new information relevant to the research questions (Guest et al., 2006).

Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering instrument was a validated semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions covering the informants' rehabilitation experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, perceptions of support from staff, social workers, and facilitators, and suggestions for program enhancement. Expert validation was undertaken to assess the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions. A demographic profile sheet was also used, and interviews were audio-recorded with permission to support accurate verbatim transcription.

Data Gathering Procedure

After securing institutional and administrative permissions, the researcher coordinated with authorized center personnel to identify eligible informants. The purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality safeguards, and the right to refuse questions or withdraw were explained before participation. One-on-one, face-to-face interviews were then conducted using the validated guide, with follow-up questions used for clarification or elaboration. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy, anonymized, and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step descriptive phenomenological method. The researcher read and reread the transcripts, extracted significant statements, formulated meanings, clustered related meanings into themes, integrated the themes into an exhaustive description, condensed the description into the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and returned the findings to the informants for member checking. Coding was used only as an organizational aid for significant statements and formulated meanings; thematic interpretation followed the Colaizzi process.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical safeguards were applied throughout the study because the informants were youth undergoing rehabilitation. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from informants aged 18 years or above; the appropriate consent and assent procedures were observed for the informant who was below 18. Interviews were conducted sensitively and nonjudgmentally, and informants could pause, decline to answer, or discontinue participation. Codes replaced names in transcripts and reports, audio recording required permission, and research data were handled confidentially and used only for the purposes of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the fifteen interviews produced a multidimensional description of rehabilitation organized around four substantive research questions: experiences during the stay, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, and support received. Across these areas, the narratives showed that rehabilitation involved both institutional structure and an evolving process of emotional, relational, behavioral, educational, and spiritual adjustment.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes Across the Four Experiential Domains

Domain	Themes	Central Thematic Pattern
Experiences during rehabilitation	7	Prison-like expectations and initial fear; changed perception of Bahay Pag-asa as supportive; emotional distress, homesickness, and family separation; gradual adjustment; spiritual growth and values formation; meaningful educational, recreational, and developmental participation; personal, behavioral, and social transformation.
Challenges encountered	10	Family separation and homesickness; adjustment to rules and routines; interpersonal conflict and negative peer influence; restricted movement; personal and behavioral change; improving social and family relationships; continuing emotional effects of separation; generally manageable formal activities; continuing self-regulation difficulties.
Coping mechanisms	16	Productive, academic, recreational, and creative activities; self-calming, reflection, and conflict avoidance; support from staff, social workers, and family; prayer and spiritual coping; hope and motivation to change; counseling, advice, positive thinking, problem-solving, and family-focused coping.
Support received	16	Continuous guidance and counseling; legal and court-related assistance; educational and personal-development support; practical and parental-like care; peer encouragement and friendship; psychosocial and emotional-regulation activities; spiritual activities; family, basic-needs, and reintegration support.

Rehabilitation Experiences: From Fear to Adjustment and Personal Transformation

Seven interrelated themes described how the informants experienced their stay. Admission was often marked by fear, uncertainty, sadness, homesickness, and the expectation that Bahay Pag-asa would resemble an ordinary jail. One informant stated, “Akala ko po talaga ito ay isang kulongan, literal na kulongan.” As residents became familiar with the environment, however, many reported a changed perception of the center as a place of opportunity, guidance, activities, and second chances. This shift indicates that admission and orientation are critical moments in which misconceptions and emotional distress can be addressed through clear, child-sensitive information and supportive contact.

The later themes reflected gradual adjustment, spiritual growth and values formation, participation in educational and recreational activities, and personal, behavioral, and social transformation. Informants described improved self-control, respect, communication, responsibility, and relationships as their stay progressed. These findings are consistent with the rehabilitative orientation of Bahay Pag-asa under Philippine law and with evidence that juvenile interventions are strengthened when they provide structured, developmentally responsive, and relationship-based opportunities for change (DSWD, 2015; Kimbrell et al., 2023; Sankofa et al., 2018).

Challenges: Family Separation, Institutional Adjustment, Peer Dynamics, and Self-Regulation

Ten themes captured the challenges of rehabilitation. Family separation and homesickness were especially salient, with one informant explaining, “Hindi ko po kasama ang pamilya ko. Hindi katulad pag sa labas po anytime pag gusto mo sila makita pwede.” Residents also described difficulty adjusting to rules, daily routines,

disciplinary expectations, restricted movement, and living with peers from different backgrounds. Peer relationships could involve teasing, conflict, or pressure to engage in prohibited behavior, requiring residents to resist negative influence and learn more deliberate emotional control.

A notable finding was that many informants considered the formal rehabilitation activities themselves manageable; their more persistent difficulties were emotional, relational, and institutional. This distinction suggests that program enhancement should address the conditions surrounding rehabilitation as much as the formal activities offered. Consistent with DSWD (2015) and the broader therapeutic literature, continuous family contact, psychosocial support, conflict management, and emotional-regulation interventions are necessary to complement structured programming (McCart et al., 2023; Young et al., 2017).

Coping: Multiple and Individualized Strategies

Sixteen themes described how the informants coped with stress and adjustment. Strategies included academic and productive activities, sports and recreation, creative activities, self-calming, reflection, conflict avoidance, counseling, family support, staff guidance, prayer, spiritual practices, positive thinking, and problem-solving. One informant described using basketball to relax and reduce stress, illustrating how ordinary structured activities could function as practical emotion-regulation strategies within the center.

The diversity of coping responses indicates that no single strategy was sufficient for all residents. Some relied primarily on family or staff, others on spiritual practice or recreation, and others on reflection and deliberate avoidance of conflict. This supports an individualized approach to rehabilitation in which residents are given multiple constructive pathways for emotional regulation, engagement, and growth. Such flexibility is consistent with the principle that intervention should be responsive to individual treatment needs and circumstances (Kinscherff, 2016).

Support: A Multidimensional Network of Care

Sixteen themes also described the support provided within and around the center. Professional support included continuous guidance and counseling, legal and court-related assistance, educational help, psychosocial services, seminars, emotional-regulation activities, practical care, and assistance with basic needs. Family members, peers, and more experienced residents additionally provided encouragement, companionship, listening, and motivation. Peer support, however, was not experienced equally by all informants, underscoring the need for supervised and constructive peer interaction.

The findings show that rehabilitation support extended beyond counseling to include case management, education, practical care, relationships, spiritual activities, and reintegration-oriented assistance. This integrated pattern aligns with national Bahay Pag-asa guidance and with research emphasizing relationship-based and community-linked support for justice-involved youth (Boering et al., 2024; DSWD, 2015; Labriola et al., 2024). Effective rehabilitation therefore depends on coordinated support systems capable of responding simultaneously to safety, belonging, education, emotional well-being, legal needs, and future reintegration.

Project Bahay Kalinga: Findings-Based Program Enhancement

The findings led to the development of Project Bahay Kalinga: An Enhanced Youth Rehabilitation Framework for Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center. The program was designed to complement, rather than replace, the existing rehabilitation program. It translates the informants' experiences and expressed needs into five major enhancement areas that can be validated and refined by the center, the Palawan Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office, the Provincial Government, TESDA, families, and other appropriate partners.

Table 2. Core Enhancement Areas of Project Bahay Kalinga

Enhancement Area	Need Identified in the Findings	Proposed Program Response
Intake and adjustment	Initial fear, misconceptions, uncertainty, and emotional distress	Child-sensitive intake orientation, clear explanation of rules and services, and emotional check-ins for newly admitted youth.

Technical-vocational development	Need for stronger livelihood preparation and recognized competencies	Coordination with TESDA and other training institutions for feasible skills training and competency assessment/certification.
Facilities and living conditions	Restricted movement and concerns related to residential/activity space	Assessment and phased improvement or reconfiguration of residential and activity spaces to support safety and development.
Family involvement and reconciliation	Homesickness, separation, and need for continuing family support	Regular youth-parent/family counseling, communication, and pre-release reintegration preparation.
Inclusive psychosocial, values, and spiritual support	Diverse emotional, coping, developmental, and spiritual needs	Sustained counseling, emotional-regulation activities, education/recreation, values formation, and voluntary inclusive spiritual support.

The program also proposes phased planning, capacity building, implementation, monitoring, and sustainability mechanisms. The source thesis explicitly identifies the budget figures in the full program as indicative planning estimates requiring official validation before adoption. Accordingly, the journal article retains the strategic program components but does not present the unvalidated cost estimates as established findings.

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of youth in the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center show rehabilitation as a gradual process of adjustment, coping, and personal transformation. Informants moved from initial fear, uncertainty, homesickness, and prison-like expectations toward greater familiarity with the center, participation in structured activities, more positive perceptions, and reported personal and behavioral growth. Their experiences demonstrate that institutional structure can support development when it is accompanied by guidance, relationships, meaningful activity, and opportunities for reflection and change.

The challenges experienced by the informants were multidimensional. Family separation, institutional routines, peer conflict and influence, restricted movement, and continuing emotional self-regulation remained important even when formal rehabilitation activities were generally manageable. Coping was likewise diverse, drawing on education, recreation, productive activity, counseling, family relationships, staff support, spirituality, reflection, positive thinking, and problem-solving. These findings indicate that rehabilitation should remain individualized and should not depend on a single intervention or coping pathway.

Overall, the existing rehabilitation program provides an important foundation for youth development and reintegration but can be strengthened in selected areas. Project Bahay Kalinga responds directly to the identified need for stronger intake and adjustment support, technical-vocational opportunities, improved physical conditions, family involvement and reconciliation, and inclusive psychosocial, values-oriented, and spiritual support. The study contributes a resident-centered framework for program enhancement grounded in the voices and experiences of youth undergoing rehabilitation.

Recommendation

1. The Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center may strengthen intake and orientation by clearly explaining the center, its rules, routines, services, and rehabilitative purpose while providing emotional support during the adjustment period. Facility limitations identified in the study may also be assessed with the appropriate provincial offices to improve safety and developmentally appropriate residential and activity spaces.
2. Social workers, facilitators, and other rehabilitation personnel may sustain individualized counseling, emotional-regulation activities, case management, educational assistance, and family-inclusive interventions. Regular communication and counseling with parents or guardians should be strengthened in preparation for reintegration.

3. The center may coordinate with TESDA and other qualified training institutions to expand technical-vocational opportunities leading, where feasible, to recognized competencies or National Certificates such as NC II, subject to youth interests, eligibility, facility capacity, and available resources.
4. The rehabilitation program should continue to provide a balanced range of educational, recreational, productive, psychosocial, values-oriented, and voluntary inclusive spiritual activities so that residents have multiple constructive ways to cope, learn, and develop positive behavior.
5. Project Bahay Kalinga may be considered for phased validation and implementation by the Palawan Bahay Pag-asa Rehabilitation Center, PSWDO, Provincial Government, TESDA, families, and other appropriate partners, with regular monitoring and evaluation of feasibility, effectiveness, and sustainability.
6. Future research may follow youth after discharge and reintegration, incorporate the perspectives of parents, social workers, house parents, and other stakeholders, or evaluate the implementation and outcomes of enhanced rehabilitation interventions across additional Bahay Pag-asa settings.

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