

2015-2016 Year End Report

During the 2015-2016 school year, Homeless Youth Connection (HYC) assisted 245 homeless youth. Of those students, 111 were seniors; 76 graduated high school, 18 will be going back to high school, and 2 are working. Of the remaining students, 41 were in 9th grade, 43 were in 10th grade and 42 were in 11th grade. Of the total number of students we served, 130 were male and 115 were female. Their ethnicities were 33% Caucasian, 36% Hispanic, 19% African American, 1% Asian, 1% Native American and 10% multi.

HYC worked with 34 high schools in six districts; 38 students from the Agua Fria Union High School Districts, 37 students from the Buckeye Union High School District, 19 students from Dysart Union High School District; 89 students from the Peoria Unified School District, 1 student from the Saddle Mountain Unified District, 47 students from the Tolleson Union High School District, 1 student from the Higley Unified School District, 6 students were in charter schools and we assisted 7 alumni students.

Upon acceptance into the program, each homeless youth received an assessment by the case managers for basic needs including clothing, food, hygiene items and school supplies. This year items were provided to our youth thanks to the generosity of community partners including Summit Community Church, Abrazo Health, the Honey Foundation, Olson Ortho, Cancer Treatment Centers of America, and Walmart just to name a few.

In addition to basic needs, many of our youth participated in Life Skills classes. During the year HYC provided six classes including; how to apply for scholarships, drug prevention, how to secure employment, vocational programs through West-Mec, financial literacy and leadership. Because transportation is a challenge for our students, the school districts provided transportation to the classes. Once a month, the schools would bring the students to HYC. Prior to the class, students were able to pick out clothing and hygiene items from the Teen Store and after the class one of the local churches provided lunch. We want to thank the Refinery Christian Church, Realty One Group and Church at the Sun Valley, as well as the numerous volunteers that made each class a fun and positive experience for our students.

Several of our students utilize the knowledge and skills from the Life Skills classes to secure employment. We want to thank Don Mellon for his willingness to hire a number of our students to work in his McDonald's locations.

Since Fall, the mentor program has continued to grow significantly. Following a successful breakfast event in October, more than 60 new volunteers expressed an interest in becoming an adult mentor. Over the course of the year, more than 80 new mentor leads were established and of those, about 30 have gone on to be trained to become mentors, ready to be matched with student. Of those 30, 17 were successfully matched with a student and have developed a new relationship to set personal goals for the student. Mentor training was revised to include a commitment goal setting to help the student establish firm plans for the future. Goals including budget development, work on college applications and financial aid and trips to local technical schools, universities and community colleges. We continue to recruit and train new mentors and have training sessions scheduled with other influential groups including Luke Air Force Base and the West Valley Mavericks. It is our goal to train and partner at least another 30 adults and students for the upcoming year.

The Host Family program had an impactful year. We experienced more students in a shorter period of time that were suddenly unaccompanied and in immediate need of a safe place to stay. Our outreach efforts in those case helped establish new and powerful relationships with more local churches, including CCV, which hosts several campuses across the Valley and also facilitates the Safe Family Program. Through the Safe Family program we also developed new relationships with Safe Families coordinator staff who have agreed to work with us to identify families within their church community. And, we made new connections with local family/human services groups that have enthusiastically agreed to support our Host Family efforts whenever possible. This past school year, 17 Host Families provided safe and stable housing for our unaccompanied youth.

Transportation is a major barrier for the majority of our youth. While the schools provide transportation to and from school, it is difficult for our students to get to other appointments such as doctor visits, counseling appointments, or job interviews. To address this challenge, HYC implemented a volunteer transportation pool. This is an excellent opportunity for individuals to help our students directly, while maintaining a flexible schedule. Each volunteer is fingerprinted and background checked.

In November, the HYC staff attended the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) conference held in Phoenix, AZ. Over 1,200 educators, service providers, advocates and legislators came together to address the challenges and opportunities homeless youth experience in completing their education.

In addition to the informational workshops, Homeless Youth Connection was selected as the Conference Service Project. This provided HYC a great opportunity to increase our awareness not only with individuals serving youth in Arizona but throughout the country as well.

As a result, we met with the district liaisons of the Phoenix and Deer Valley school districts and they expressed their interest in having HYC assist their homeless population. In addition, the leaders at NAEHCY invited us to join a task force to address the lack of services for homeless youth in the East Valley. Several members of the task force represented the East Valley school districts including Chandler, Higley and Tempe and they have invited us to team up with their schools to provide service for their students.

We are very excited about the opportunity to assist more homeless youth. Recent reports from the Arizona Department of Education indicate that there are more than 4,200 homeless youth attending high school in Arizona and 529 of those students are unaccompanied youth or youth on their own. By increasing our reach from six districts to twelve we plan to assist more than 400 homeless youth in the upcoming school year. To meet this need, HYC has added a new case manager and we will be hiring another case manager during the summer. This will bring the case management team to four. An average case load for a case manager is about 100 to 120 students.

HYC has been very blessed to have tremendous support from West Valley businesses, municipalities, churches, service organizations and individuals. We are going to use this model of support to meet the needs of homeless youth in the East Valley and Phoenix. We are reaching out to companies headquartered in the East Valley to identify representatives who are passionate about youth, education and homelessness to serve on our Board of Trustees. We will also be contacting the churches and service organizations about our Host Family and Mentor program. HYC believes it is important to donors and volunteers to support the needs in their community and this targeted effort will allow them to meet that need.

We are extremely proud of the growth and impact HYC has experienced this past year. Together with our staff, board, volunteers, and community partners we will continue to help homeless youth have a chance at a brighter future through education and positive choices.

The following success stories demonstrate the impact HYC has had on homeless youth in our community.

Robert was born in a foreign country where he lost his mother at the age of 5. Until recently, Robert has lived with his father. Unfortunately, Robert's father has been very ill for some time, and has become unable to care for himself or Robert. Therefore, Robert's father plans to move back to his home country to be with family while he deals with his illness, and was insistent that Robert go with him. However, Robert has not been to his birthplace since his early years, and he has no memory of ever living there. He was very resistant to the idea of moving there. In addition, Robert faces difficulties because his lifestyle choices differs from the norm of society, especially within his culture. These disagreements with his family have created tension that has resulted in Robert becoming homeless. However, since HYC has become involved, Robert has improved dramatically – not only academically, but as an overall person. Now that he doesn't need to worry about where he is going to sleep, he can focus on school and graduation.

Sonia is a refugee from a foreign country where she and her family were treated poorly, at best, on a daily basis. Sonia was able to escape from her country and find her way into the United States. Unfortunately, her family remains in their home country where they are often beaten, raped and left with very little to eat. Sonia is often very sad because of this, and becomes overwhelmed with her emotions. These overwhelming emotions have been affecting her academic performance. Until recently, Sonia was staying with family friends. It was brought to the attention of HYC case managers that Sonia was being locked out of the home and was not being allowed to do her homework. The family with whom Sonia was residing discouraged her from attending school and often would not provide her with transportation to or from school. Sonia's basic needs were often unmet, as well. Since HYC's involvement, Sonia has been placed into a host family, where she is thriving both academically and socially. She recently graduated high school, and is in the process of enrolling in college. In addition, HYC is exploring ways to help Sonia bring her family to the United States, which would go a long way toward healing her emotional scars.