

Homeless Youth Connection 2017-2018 Year End Report

Homeless Youth Connection (HYC) is pleased to report that, once again, we have had a very successful year. With the help of many community partners, HYC has continued its expansion. We established new partnerships with schools in the Phoenix Union, Paradise Valley and Mesa districts, as well as numerous charter schools. Currently, HYC provides services in 78 traditional, charter, and online schools throughout Maricopa County. Thanks in part to these new school partners, the number of students we served increased by more than 50% over last year. In total, HYC's case managers served 638 students in the 2017-2018 school year, exceeding our goal of 600 students.

Of the 638 students served, 280 were seniors; 221 (79%) of the youth graduated or are returning to school for a second senior year. Reaching graduation is only part of the goal, however. HYC's staff members also help our students address their plan for the future. Of the graduates, 131 are going on to college, five are going to vocational school, seven are joining the military, 33 have jobs, and 14 are still deciding which direction is right for them. HYC will continue to work with the 24 youth that will remain in school. Due to their homeless situation, some youth are behind academically and do not have enough credits to graduate. Some will graduate in December, but most will be enrolled for another full year.

To facilitate all of our continued growth, in July 2017, HYC moved to our third office space since our inception in 2010. The new office space provides us with more square footage to house additional staff members, as well as offer a larger Teen Exchange and quiet room for students to rest if needed. In addition, HYC's office is now located directly on a bus route, and right next to two major expressways that pass through the Phoenix metro area, which puts us in a more accessible location for both our students and our supporters.

As the number of students and schools served grows, our program continues to evolve and grow as well. For example, with the addition of students from multiple charter and online schools to our program, HYC has discovered that this population often has unique needs. Many of these students are working part-time or full-time jobs while attending school, or they are young parents whose schedule makes it difficult to attend regular classes. Expanded school hours sometimes help address this need (i.e. afternoon or evening classes), which our case managers have been required to adapt to in order to serve this unique population.

Other sub-populations and students with unique needs have presented themselves this year, as well. For instance, HYC's case managers have also worked with several students who were brought to the United States to play basketball, only to be starved and medically neglected until being abandoned with no resources or family help them. Thankfully, HYC was able to identify host families and provide case management so these students could continue their education. Several of those students graduated this year, and some were even offered basketball scholarships to college. HYC has also been working with community partners to assist these students with their immigration status.

HYC case managers also worked with a student this year who is completely deaf, speaks in ASL (American Sign Language), and only reads and writes in Spanish (our staff, unfortunately, do not speak Spanish). To work with a student who is unable to easily converse creates multiple challenges; however, a student who also has complex trauma related to being homeless creates an extremely vulnerable child. Our case managers were able to meet this unique need by working with a translator and HYC's counselor.

HYC's counseling program, CHANGE (Children Heal and New Growth Empowers) has also been updated. Many of our students are dealing with traumas in their lives. Counseling sessions can provide them with a guiding force to help them learn positive coping skills, and help keep them on track with their education. One of the barriers to providing this service has been the availability of transportation for the student to attend counseling sessions. This year, we began providing some counseling services at their schools or in their homes, which allowed us to better serve this population. In total, 73 students took advantage of counseling sessions, with an average of five sessions per student.

Our Host Family program continues to grow and change, as well. This year, 53 of HYC's student population were placed with host families. HYC realized that to provide continuity of care for these students, it made sense to have a single case manager who managed all hosted students, rather than being assigned to various case managers depending on the school where the student is enrolled. This change allowed HYC to begin noticing similarities and differences in the needs of this population, and address them accordingly.

More changes are still needed in the Host Family program. In the 2017-2018 school year, HYC had 46 students in need of emergency housing. Unfortunately, we did not always have immediate availability of a host home for these students. Thanks to a partnership with Catholic Charities, funding was made available this year to purchase an Emergency Host Home, which will provide temporary housing for up to eight students at a time. The availability of this home will allow HYC the time necessary to identify and properly establish a more permanent Host Family for the student. It will also allow a respite for host families who may be out of town, have an emergency, or other unexpected circumstances. We anticipate that the new home will be operational in the fall of 2018.

HYC's Peer Support and Youth Advisory Committee programs were established last summer. This year, students continued to be engaged in these groups. The peer support group, or "Group," as the students call it, met weekly through March 2018. On average, there were eight to ten participants at each meeting, with varying life experiences and backgrounds. They HYC students were able to form new friendships that were supportive and respectful. Additionally, at some Group sessions, guest speakers or staff would provide attendees with life skills lessons.

The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) includes alumni and current students, and is a smaller group of five to eight members. The goal of the YAC is to provide program recommendations and feedback on ways to improve the program to meet the needs of their peers. Additionally, the individuals in YAC took on a community service project this year to create and deliver bags with hygiene supplies and snacks to the Human Services Campus to provide to the homeless population that they serve. These teens and young adults are grateful for the services HYC provided them, and they actively look for ways to give back to the community.

With our continuing growth, HYC knew we needed to improve HYC's sustainability. In addition to added staff, HYC has increased efforts to expand our Board of Directors and Board of Trustees. Several new members have been added from various organizations around the Valley, and they will also work to increase HYC's awareness in the community and generate new revenue sources for our future growth.

To address the increase in student numbers, HYC has also added new staff members this past year. Two case managers were added to work directly with the additional students. HYC also added another Community Engagement Manager this year. The community engagement team is responsible for raising revenue and community awareness through events and speaking engagements, as well as recruiting, engaging, and training volunteers and Host Families.

With the Board's and community engagement team's support, HYC's community awareness continues to grow. This year, HYC has been able to establish a presence at the Maricopa Association of Government's Continuum of Care (MAG CoC). At the MAG CoC, a Youth Work Group was formed to advise the MAG Committee on the path to end youth homelessness in Maricopa County, and HYC was asked to co-chair the Youth Work Group. During the Youth Work Group meetings, members determined that the community should hear directly from youth who are currently experiencing or had previously experienced homelessness. Based on that determination, HYC partnered with other youth providers in the Valley and formed the Youth Action Board. Multiple youth served by HYC have participated in the Youth Action Board, and had the opportunity to give voice to the struggles experienced by the youth of Maricopa County.

In addition, HYC has grown our volunteer base exponentially this year, thanks to the efforts of the community engagement team. New volunteer opportunities have been provided, new partnerships established, and existing volunteer programs expanded. This past holiday season, for example, volunteers were able to secure and deliver Thanksgiving food boxes to 70 students and their families – a huge increase from the 20 that were delivered last year! HYC was also able to provide gifts for every student HYC was serving at the holidays, more than 250 students at the time, thanks to many individuals and organizations sponsoring our teens' shopping lists. Several individual volunteers have become a weekly presence around the HYC office, helping organize our teen exchange and work on administrative projects that keep our office going. We've partnered with Estrella Mountain Community College to provide community service hours to their students. Companies and organizations such as Wells Fargo, Realty One, V.I.P. Mortgage, Helping Hands at Crossings Church, and Church at Litchfield Park continue to step forward when we have a need for a group of volunteers.

Of course, HYC could not do what we do without the financial and in-kind support of our community. This year, we have seen a significant increase in non-monetary donations to HYC, thanks in part to relationships with Walmart Distribution Center and Dick's Sporting Goods. Both have given generous amounts of product to provide to our teens. Also, we established a partnership with Savers.

When we receive donations that are inappropriate for our teens (i.e. children's items, torn or stained clothing, etc.), we can give them to Savers, who provides us with monetary donations in exchange. We can then use those monetary donations to purchase the things that our students need.

Financial support, of course, is what keeps HYC's doors open. HYC has worked diligently to establish a multi-diverse funding base. For the past several years, HYC has seen an increase in support from large companies and foundations. We want to thank several of our community partners that made significant contributions to HYC this past year. Thank you to Thunderbirds Charities, Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, the Board of Visitors, BHHS Legacy, Allstate and the Tohono O'odham Nation. In addition, HYC's individual donor base has grown thanks to the success of the Empowering Youth campaign. And we still have the continued grass roots support from churches, services organizations and third party events. We are sincerely grateful to all of the donors for their support. Your support enhanced HYC's ability to provide critical programs to help homeless youth stay in school and complete their education.

To summarize the success of this year's activities, the following are stories of some of the youth HYC has served this year, with your help. We are so very grateful to all of our supporters – individuals, corporations, service organizations, churches, municipalities, volunteers, host families, and more – who help us make this work possible. Thank you for being a part of the HYC family.

Gaby is a 17-year-old Hispanic female who was identified to Homeless Youth Connection (HYC) in December 2017 after a short period of being a runaway. Unfortunately, the relationship between Gaby and her mother was extremely toxic, and created tremendous instability for the student. Gaby also struggled with some mental health issues when she was identified to HYC, and was hospitalized twice to manage those issues. In spite of all this, Gaby remained remarkably committed to completing her high school education and obtaining her diploma.

When Gaby joined HYC's program, she was temporarily staying with a family friend, but the situation was less than stable. Since she was under the age of 18, Gaby's housing situation had to be navigated cautiously. Gaby worked with her HYC case manager to identify possible connections for more long-term housing, and she was able to locate a friend whose family was willing to allow Gaby to reside with them. Thankfully, Gaby's mother was willing to allow her to stay with them, and she finally found some stability there. In addition, HYC's case management team was able to connect Gaby with community mental health services to begin addressing her needs. HYC also continued to provide Gaby with hygiene, clothing, school supplies and food support throughout the school year.

Thanks to all of the assistance HYC provided Gaby, she remained engaged within her school and with her peers, participating in several school clubs. Gaby was determined to stay active in her education, and showed tremendous resiliency when facing her challenges. With HYC's help, Gaby was able to attend her senior trip with one of her extracurricular clubs – an opportunity that would have not been possible prior to HYC's involvement. In addition to all her extracurricular activities, Gaby worked diligently to maintain her grades and attendance. She graduated this past May, and even more impressively, was awarded the Obama Scholarship and the Dean's Scholarship. She has now been accepted at Arizona State University, where she is excited to be enrolled for next semester.

David moved to Arizona with his father during his elementary school years. Unfortunately, after David completed his final semester of 8th grade, his father was deported because of drug charges. This left David alone here in Arizona. David's mother lived in another state, and unfortunately did not have room for him there. He was left with nowhere to go, and no family to support him. David was temporarily staying with friends when he started high school. Throughout the first three years of high school, David bounced between friend's homes, staying as long as they would let him before moving on to another. HYC provided resources during this time, and encouraged David to take advantage of the host family opportunity. However, having been let down by adults in the past, David was reluctant to put his trust in the hands of strangers.

During his senior year in high school, David was running out of places he could stay, so he finally accepted HYC's assistance through the Host Family program. This provided David with the opportunity to remain in the same home for the remainder of his high school education, giving him the stability he so desperately needed. Having a place to call home gave David a set place for all his things and no worries about what tomorrow held, so he was able to focus on his studies and participate in athletics without distraction. With the help and support of HYC and his host family, David graduated high school, and will be attending University in the fall thanks to a full ride scholarship for his athletic ability.