

Homeless Youth Connection 2016-2017 Year End Report

Homeless Youth Connection (HYC) is excited to report another successful year of helping homeless youth with their education. Thanks to help from community partners, HYC provided 400 homeless youth with basic needs, case management, housing and other resources so they could stay in school. This year, HYC expanded throughout Maricopa County, collaborating with more than 50 high schools in 12 districts. We were honored to add Higley Unified, Paradise Valley Unified and Phoenix Union School Districts, and Ombudsman Charter Schools to the amazing list of partnering high schools.

Of the 400 homeless youth served by HYC this year, 125 were seniors. Of those seniors, 105 graduated, and the other 20 will be going to summer school or finishing their education in the fall. Of the 105 that graduated, 71 are going to college, eight are going to vocational school, 17 have jobs, four are joining the military, and four are unknown/other.

As HYC continues to grow, we are focused on offering the best program possible to ensure our youth complete their education, and more importantly, have a plan for the future. This past year, the case management team implemented several mandatory program components for seniors including completing the FAFSA (financial aid for students). Most homeless youth do not dream of going to college because they do not believe they can afford the expense. Once the youth see there is funding available, the possibility of a higher education becomes more of a reality. Additionally, the case managers focus on life skills including budgeting, healthy eating, positive relationships, transportation options and housing. "Every moment with a student is a teachable moment," according to Tarinda Craglow, HYC case manager. Case managers also work with seniors to ensure they have all of their vital documents, including birth certificates, immunization records, driver's license or state ID. and social security card. Additionally, they ensure that each student has some form of insurance. These life skills are typically taken for granted, however for most of our youth, no one has taken the time to teach them these important life lessons.

One of the most important case management components is helping the students develop their "Plan for the Future." It is not enough to help our youth graduate high school; they need to have a plan for post-graduation. Case managers help youth identify what they want to do and then help the students create a plan to accomplish that goal. This plan is supported by the host families and mentors and helps youth avoid homelessness in the future. It gives them a goal to strive for which will help motivate them to stay in school, graduate and take the next step toward a brighter future.

We are very grateful to the individuals and families who volunteered to provide our youth with a safe and stable home this past year as part of the Host Family program. It takes a very giving and caring individual to invite a teenager into their life and offer support, understanding and comfort. Thanks to these incredible volunteers, 44 unaccompanied homeless youth had a place to call home. Of the 44 students living with host families, 22 were seniors. Nineteen of those youth graduated, and the other three are going back to school. Of the 19 who graduated, 13 are going on to college, two plan to join the military, one will attend vocational school, two have jobs, and one plans to volunteer while he works on his immigration status. These statistics show us that this program is working!

We appreciate the churches, service organizations and municipalities that help us recruit host families. Their partnership is an important key to increasing the awareness about this vital program. While the majority of unaccompanied homeless youth needed HYC to secure a host family, a number of youth in the program identified their own host family. This allowed the students to feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings, and provided a faster placement in emergency situations. No matter how these host families were identified, we are grateful to everyone who made a difference in the lives of our unaccompanied homeless youth this year.

As we continue to grow, we are always looking for ways to improve our program. To help with this effort, HYC created the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), which will provide feedback directly from our students. The YAC is led by a HYC alumni, and is comprised of graduating seniors who want to give back and ensure the next group of homeless youth have the programs and resources they need to be successful. In addition to reviewing the current program, the committee also wants to make a difference in the lives of other homeless individuals in the community.

Currently, they are focused on a community outreach project. The committee recently toured the Human Services Campus to learn more about the Valley's homeless population. During the visit, each student had a different perspective. "I am speechless at the amount of people being helped down at that campus, but I am also so thankful for HYC, because if it was not for HYC I would be one of those people that are down there just sitting on the grass waiting for help," said Maria.

Later this summer, the YAC will return to the campus with 100 care packages filled with socks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and sunscreen for the individual homeless who frequent the campus.

In addition to the YAC, HYC also developed a Support Group that is led by student peers. A common misconception by most youth is that they think they are the only ones experiencing their situation. One of the students in the support group commented that it was comforting to hear that the person right next to them also kept their clothes in a garbage bag or was worried about whose sofa they were going to sleep on that night. The group allowed them to address many of the issues related to homelessness, like abandonment and betrayal. We have seen tremendous benefits when our students meet each other and talk about where they came from and where they are going. They feel like they have a voice and connection for the first time in their lives. In addition to the love and support they feel HYC has given them, they are grateful for the encouragement and understanding they receive from each other.

To accommodate the growing number of homeless youth served, HYC increased our case management team. In addition to a new case manager, HYC hired ML Carr as the Client Services Director. Ms. Carr provides supervision for the case management team, as well as the counseling program, components of integrated health, the internship and alumni programs, and facilitates the HYC's Youth Advisory Committee. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor who has more than thirty years of experience in serving communities through client services leadership, counseling the vulnerable, and program development that enriches and empowers children, teens, and adults. Ms. Carr holds a BS in Criminal Justice and MS in Counseling Psychology. In addition, Ms. Carr is licensed by the State of Arizona as a Professional Counselor (LPC) and certified as a Clinical Supervisor and is also certified as a Life Coach. Ms. Carr oversees the case management program, as well as the counseling program, components of integrated health, the internship and alumni programs, and facilitates the HYC's YAC.

To further help with the growth, HYC is working to secure interns from Arizona State University, University of Phoenix and Maricopa County Community Colleges to support the case management team. Each case manager serves approximately 100 homeless youth over the course of a school year. In addition to providing basic needs, case managers help the youth schedule and attend medical and dental appointments, secure vital documents, enroll in AHCCCS and SNAP for health care coverage and food assistance, attend counseling appointments and much more. The logistics of attending and providing transportation for all these appointments can be time consuming for our case managers. Having interns to assist with these important appointments will allow case managers to have more quality time with their students to focus on their education and plans for the future.

HYC also continues to increase its awareness in the community and beyond. We have met with representatives from the State Homeless Department, Arizona Department of Education, Department of Economic Security, and Department of Child Services in an effort to streamline programs and services for our youth. We are excited to build new partnerships with organizations like Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, the Board of Visitors, and National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) just to name a few.

HYC has grown out of need and demand for services. In the upcoming school year, we plan to serve more than 600 homeless youth throughout the Valley. To accommodate this growth, HYC is excited to announce that we will be moving to a new location. On July 1st, our new office will be located at 9950 W. Van Buren Street, Ste. 114 in Avondale. Please plan on joining us for a celebration in August.

We are deeply grateful to the number of municipalities, corporations, services organizations, churches and individuals that continue to provide financial support, as well as volunteers, mentors and host families. Working together, we can significantly impact the lives of homeless youth in our community. The following are just a few of the many youth HYC was able to assist thanks to your support.

Ashley* is just one of the invisible homeless who was failed for years by her biological family, Child Welfare Services and finally her adoptive parents. As a result, Ashley decided to take her own life; she felt the struggle to die would be less painful than her struggle to survive. With her decision made, she went to school to say goodbye to her friends. During her first class, she became extremely emotional, and fortunately she was referred to the school psychologist who connected Ashley with HYC. The psychologist trusted the agency's ability to assess the crisis and deliver the necessary interventions. HYC initiated four intensive days of professional support which resulted in stabilization, emergency placement and the identification of a Host Family. Because of the support she received, Ashley is now enrolled in college, serves on HYC's Youth Advisory Committee, works for the betterment of her community and has a bright future. She sums up her experience by stating, "if not for the love of all the women at HYC, I would not be here today."

Matthew* was moved from place to place while his father was in prison and his mother tried to make ends meet. His mother became addicted to drugs and continued to go downhill, but Matthew wanted to continue to go to high school. A family friend, who was working more often than not, allowed Matthew to move in. Although the friend provided a roof over Matthew's head and food for the ever-growing boy, he was unable to be there to watch over Matthew and make sure he was doing the right things to get through high school.

Though Matthew continued to attend high school, he did not care about his grades. He knew that no one in his family had ever graduated high school, so just to be attending was progress in his eyes. After being a fifth-year senior, Matthew had run out of hope. HYC encouraged Matthew to continue for one more year. Through perseverance, determination, and strong pushing with love from HYC, in May 2017 Matthew held his head high as he became the first one in his family to walk across the stage and be handed a high school diploma. Matthew is now registered to attend college in the fall, and has dreams of producing music in his future.

LGBTQ students face a particular set of challenges, both in becoming homeless as well as when they are trying to avoid homelessness. LGBTQ youth face social stigma, discrimination, and often rejection by their families, which adds to the physical and mental strains/challenges that all homeless individuals must endure. This can also be more of a challenge, depending on individual's religious beliefs. Cory* was raised in an ultra-conservative family. He always felt different than his family. At age 15, Cory told his family he did not accept the religious views they were trying to force upon him, and he did not want to participate in the traditional rituals. In addition to his spiritual difference, Cory revealed to his family that he was gay. The tension that had been growing between Cory and his family escalated to the point where Cory felt ridiculed and blamed for any strife amongst the family. Once Cory turned 18, he was told to leave his home and not return.

Cory turned to friends at first, and eventually to a Host Family provided by HYC. Cory graduated high school at peace with being able to be himself. Though he was taught within his family to not further his education, Cory now plans to pursue his dreams of attending college and studying theater.

*Not their real names