

## **Empowering Youth For The Future**

### **Mission and overview of the program**

Homeless Youth Connection's (HYC) mission is to eliminate barriers to graduation for homeless youth and create lasting solutions for a successful future through community support and increased awareness. Together with educators, government agencies, community partners, local corporations, service organizations, compassionate and caring community members, HYC helps youth experiencing homelessness find their strengths and hope for a successful future.

HYC was founded in 2010 to meet the needs of homeless youth who wish to remain in high school but may be forced to drop out because they lack a safe or stable home. Beginning with one high school, HYC has expanded to serve 120 schools in 13 districts throughout Maricopa County and the City of Flagstaff.

HYC serves homeless youth between the ages of 13 and 21. The Arizona Department of Education reported more than 7,400 homeless youth, in 9-12 grade, are living in Arizona and more than 1,800 are unaccompanied youth. These students face numerous barriers to education, keeping many of them from completing high school or achieving post-secondary education.

HYC's Empowering Youth For The Future (EYFTF) program is a comprehensive social services program that provides homeless youth with housing, basic needs, case management, and support with their education. Through the EYFTF program, we can help youth implement case plans that will stabilize youth, move them forward, promote individual accomplishment and avoid homelessness in the future.

HYC is a preventive measure to chronic homelessness. When you take away the worry about basic needs, homeless youth will thrive, graduate, and succeed.

### **Description of Program/Project**

The most effective types of interventions for homeless youth engage the youth early in the cycle of homelessness. When services are provided at a separate facility, youth may not be able to find transportation to and from appointments, which greatly limits their ability to benefit from these programs. HYC alleviates this by providing youth with basic needs and by stabilizing them in appropriate and supportive environments. HYC uses an innovative approach to helping homeless youth stay in school and complete their education by meeting youth "where they are."

HYC's Empowering Youth for the Future (EYFTF) program is a comprehensive social services program that engages high school aged youth experiencing homelessness in trauma-informed, client-led, strengths-based interventions. Youth coaches work together with youth to identify needs related to academics, health, housing, hygiene, employment, and independent living skills. Youth then identify their strengths and goals, and partner with the youth coach to establish a plan. HYC believes that through authentic youth engagement and positive youth development, youth will succeed and reach their highest potential.

To address the housing needs of unaccompanied homeless youth, HYC implemented a Host Family model as part of the EYFTF program. Host homes are a low-cost, community-engaging strategy to address the immediate housing need without incurring the high costs of operating an emergency shelter or transitional housing program. The host family provides shelter, food and transportation for youth, while the organization delivers case management and comprehensive services.

As HYC strives to become a fully integrated top-down trauma-informed social service agency, we continue to provide services in ways that will best meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness by using evidence-based, culturally competent, cutting edge methods. HYC utilizes numerous philosophies and models in case management to help support the resilience and self-efficacy of the youth we serve. Models include Trauma Informed Care, Strengths-Based Approach, Resiliency Theory, Systems Theory, Stages of Change Theory, Motivational Interviewing, and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. Youth who are interested in getting support are partnered with a youth coach to develop a plan and work towards independence and success. Youth coaches provide services more traditionally thought of as case management. Our goal is to partner with youth using strategies and techniques that are grounded in evidenced-based research and have proven effective when engaging with youth who have experienced trauma.

Program success is measured by the number of youth who complete the school year, increase independent living skills, establish a plan for after high school, and have a healthy support network in their life. Expected outcomes for fiscal year 2021-2022 include:

- 600 homeless youth will be served through case management.
  - 90% of homeless youth will remain enrolled and complete the school year.
  - 80% of youth will be fluent in public transportation.
  - 75% of youth will self-report an increase in their independent living skills.
  - 35% of youth will participate in workforce services through partnership.
  - 80% of youth will improve their general, dental, and mental health by maintaining health insurance, food assistance, all vital documents and by having access to counseling services.
  - 90% of youth will complete a human trafficking screening.
  - 90% of youth will complete a Permanent Connections graph.
  - 90% of youth will report having one non-RHY staff adult who they can go to for support and advice through their Permanent Connections support map.
  
- 100 homeless youth who are seniors will graduate high school.
  - 90% homeless youth who are seniors will remain enrolled or graduate
  - 90% of seniors will complete their Plan for the Future
  - 30% of seniors will be employed
  
- 30 unaccompanied homeless youth will show stability by remaining in the Host Family program.
  - 100% of host family youth will participate in a clinical assessment with a licensed professional counselor.
  - 90% of exiting host family youth will exit to a safe and stable housing destination.
  - 75% of host family youth will be employed or looking for work.

HYC uses short- and long-term goals designed to help increase the development of each youth and provide them with skills to be independent and resilient adults. Goals focus on improving safety, well-being, self-sufficiency and increasing permanent connections.

### **Statement of Need**

HYC is needed in our community to serve homeless youth, between the ages of 13 and 21, who wish to remain in high school, but may be forced to drop out because they lack a safe or stable home.

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) December 2017 report states that more than 1.3 million youth were identified as homeless and attending school. On average, more than 75% of homeless youth drop out of school.

Over 30% of homeless youth are “unaccompanied”, often referred to as “youth on their own,” and are the most difficult subpopulation of homeless to quantify. Many homeless youth do what they have to in order to survive, such as sleeping in cars, bartering sex for shelter, couch surfing from one friend’s house to another, or residing with abusive family members. Without real support, such youth may find themselves in and out of jail, dependent on the welfare system, or living their lives in a chronic state of crisis.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in many urban communities, the youth homelessness system consists of programs to assist youth only after they become homeless. The majority of nonprofit or government services for homeless youth focus on runaway and homeless youth who are not attending high school. For youth under 18, most efforts help youth avoid the need for emergency shelter whenever possible by connecting and/or reunifying them with members of their family or other natural supports. Far too often, youth become homeless because neither the public child welfare system nor the private nonprofit agencies offer early intervention or prevention. This creates a gap through which many at-risk youth fall, creating avoidable episodes of homelessness.

Approximately 40% of youth participating in the HYC program are seniors or second-year seniors between the ages of 17 and 21. Based on intake reports, these youth frequently lack basic needs (clothing, food, hygiene), they are behind academically, and they are at greater risk of developing emotional and mental health issues. Many of them have not been to the doctor or dentist in several years. They often lack access to reliable transportation, and their housing has been unstable for most of their high school experience.

HYC addresses these challenges by filling gaps in available services and providing effective interventions that meet the needs of homeless youth attending high school in Maricopa County.

**Partners in the community that are also working on the same issues, and how you are coordinating with them.**

HYC's primary collaborative partners are the high schools throughout Maricopa County. The homeless liaison in each high school identifies youth experiencing homelessness based on the McKinney-Vento criteria.

HYC also partners with numerous organizations to ensure that youth are connected with needed resources including:

- AZ Department of Economic Security – Provides welfare assistance, SNAP, health insurance, childcare vouchers, and bus passes.
- St. Joseph the Worker and Trinity Opportunity Alliance – Provide job preparedness and employment assistance through corporate partnerships.
- West-MEC (Maricopa Education Center) and EVIT (East Valley Institute for Technology) - Provides vocational training.
- Adelante Healthcare and Brighter Way – Provides medical and dental care and assistance with health insurance.
- West Valley Vision – Provides vision exams and glasses.
- Job Corps – Provides education and employment services.
- Walmart – Provides monthly donations of hygiene items, household items, school supplies and bicycles for our youth.
- Dick's Sporting Goods – Provides clothing and sporting equipment.
- ALWAYS – Provides legal services.
- Host Families – Community individuals who volunteer to provide safe and stable housing.

**Success Rate**

During the 2020-21 school year, HYC served 322 youths—a lower number than previous years due to the pandemic. HYC served 58 freshmen, 49 sophomores, 49 juniors, 100 seniors, and 15 college youths, as well as 51 alumni who participated in aftercare services. In May 2021, there were 73 seniors actively participating in the program. Of those, 56 graduated, and nine will be attending summer school or another year of high school to make up classes. HYC helped 90% of seniors stay in school and complete their education.

HYC's Host Family program remained flexible to meet the changing needs of unaccompanied youth during the pandemic, providing safe and stable housing to 24 unaccompanied youth. Of those youth, eight were seniors, and all graduated from high school. Eight additional youth were last years' graduates that HYC continued to support during their first year of college. This year we also provided services to two first-year college youths who were new to the HYC program. We rounded out the school year with three youths who will continue with HYC this coming school year; two will be seniors and one will be a junior.