

Youth Emergency Services works to end Youth Homelessness

By Melanie Lucks

Forty-two years ago, a few Omahans opened their homes to a group of homeless youth who roamed the streets of the Old Market. This gesture of kindness led to the creation of Youth Emergency Services (YES), a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving at-risk and homeless youth.

"The founders originally served the youth in their own homes," says Mary Meints, YES executive director. "However, when the young people decided to paint the family's cupboards bright green, the group decided that they should find them their own home."

Soon after, the founders put together their own money and started the first YES shelter. Since then, YES has added street outreach, transitional living, maternity homes and a mentoring program.

"Our mission is to provide critically needed resources to empower young people to become self-sufficient," Meints says.

Street Outreach

Located off 26th and Harney streets, the Street Outreach Program now serves more than 1,000 local youth ages 12 to 21 annually.

"We help meet their basic needs," Meints says. "Our goal is prevention and education for these young people."

Several days a week, the team drives through Omaha streets and finds youth in need of basic amenities. Accompanied by a peer with YES training, the team approaches youth who often look lost. The team gives them a bag with hygiene products and nonperishable food as well as some information about the Street Outreach Center.

"The team invites the youth to come to our center where they can get a hot meal, a change of clothes and a shower," Meints says. "They can also get access to computers, receive a pantry bag, and get help finding a job or housing. We also have a mental health therapist and a visiting nurse on staff."

To receive these amenities, the youth sign in, show their IDs. The YES staff does an intake evaluation to determine their current needs.

Emergency Shelter

For youth ages 16 to 20, YES offers an emergency shelter where they can stay for up to 21 days.

"We don't like to see a lot of youth staying in shelter," Meints says. "We try to get them back on their feet as soon as possible and in contact with a close relative. However, if they can't find a place they can go into our next level of care which is transitional living."



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless

Transitional living and the maternity home

The transitional living and the maternity home are staffed 24/7 for youth ages 18 to 21.

"The youth are expected to go to school or to have a job," Meints says. "They work really hard in the first 21 days to reach their goals."

Upon arrival, every youth who uses YES must complete an Ansell Casey Life Skills Assessment, which determines if the youth knows how to do basic skills such as use a checking account, cook, grocery shop, do laundry, write a resume and interview for a job.

After completing the assessment, the youth then make a plan to complete while they are in the program. This helps YES better understand what areas the youth needs and in turn, helps the youth become more self-sufficient, Meints says.

The youth in transitional housing are required to pay rent after living in the shelter for two months. However, they get 80 percent back when they leave the housing. YES also requires youth to take financial education classes to ensure their success.

"We want them to get back into the community and back to the place that they see as home," Meints says.

Mentoring Program

YES offers a mentoring program as part of its transitional and maternity housing programs.

"Mentoring is a very good way for the youth to have somebody that's in their corner," Meints says. "Our mentors listen and talk to the youth about their issues and are just there to be a friend and role model to them."

Every youth in the transitional housing or maternity home has a mentor and every mentor is asked to stay for 12 to 16 months.

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What does a homeless youth look like? Meints sees many young faces on a weekly basis. The face of youth homelessness is made of a diverse group.

"Homelessness isn't an economic issue," Meints says. "We serve kids from every school district in the Omaha area."

In the 1970s, the YES team only did street outreach in the Old Market. Today, the team works throughout the Omaha metro area. Meints says YES invites a trained youth to its street outreach team because they are familiar with other homeless youth.

"They don't want to be identified as homeless. They'll use other words or talk about their housing situation, but if you listen closely you can hear that they aren't living in the same place consistently," Meints says. "It affects their ability to get to school, their ability to get and keep a job and their relationships with their family."

What does homeless youth look like?

Many factors cause youth homelessness such as abuse, neglect, mental health issues, substance abuse, sexual orientation, gender identity or pregnancy.

"We did a recent survey and we think between 25 and 36 percent of the youth that we serve are of the LBGTQ community," Meints says. "On the national level they say 20 to 40 percent."

Finding empowerment in small accomplishments

Meints says anytime youth get back on track, meet their goals, stay in school or land a job is a major win for YES.

"They have so many strikes against them when

they come in the door," Meints says. "Some of them have never had a person trust and believe in them, so being able to focus them and have them accomplish something is always a big success for us."

Expanding the Vision

If the youth do not have a consistent home, Meints says they are more likely to drop out of school, get into trouble and become victims of crime.

Despite successes, Meints says too many youth still need assistance. YES has outgrown its facilities.

"Trying to figure out how to maximize the amount of space we have is a big challenge," Meints says. "We barely have enough room for 20 youths to sit down, yet we serve 50 to 60 meals a night."

Serving more than 1,500 youth last year, YES has doubled the number of youths served in just four years.

"We are working on expanding into the space next door," Meints says. "We hope to remodel it by taking walls down and making it a much more welcoming area where we can eventually provide even more services."

The team hopes to complete the addition by the end of August 2016.

"We want to have a big group room where they can gather together and learn, socialize and eat together in the same space," Meints says.

Volunteer

The end goal for YES is to end youth homelessness and that means working together with anyone who wants to collaborate in the community.

"We serve an average of 700 meals a month even though we don't have a stove or an oven," Meints says. "So we depend on the community to help provide meals in roasters and crockpots."

**For more information on
volunteering, mentoring or
providing meals, visit
yesomaha.org**



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