

"A Little Bit of Home"

Outreach Gives New Hope to Homeless Youth

A typical morning brings a hungry crowd to Outreach, a faith-based nonprofit that reaches out to homeless youth, on the near-eastside of Indianapolis.

Every week, nearly 100 teenagers and young adults walk through the door of the drop-in center, gathering with volunteers and staff for a hot breakfast. They can check for mail, wash their clothes, use a computer to search for a job, and visit food and clothing pantries.

More importantly, they have a safe, family like environment, more like home than anyplace that some have ever experienced in their lives.

They include Lawrence Dean, who became homeless at age 17 when his mother kicked him out of her house. He had dropped out of school and was alone, without resources. Although he found hourly work on a janitorial and grounds crew that paid for cheap motels many nights, life was anything but stable; he became an alcoholic. Friendly and outgoing in the familiar setting of Outreach, Dean describes himself at age 23 as "sensitive. I care too much, so I get hurt a lot."

"There has been a lot of trauma in my life," he says. "I've experienced a lot of bad things."



Three years ago, his older brother recommended Dean visit Outreach, where staff worked with him to begin to repair his life. A case manager listened to his story and worked with him to obtain a birth certificate that made him eligible for other services, including the mental health treatment he desperately needed. Within the past year, Outreach helped Dean get a driver's license, begin a high school equivalency diploma program, and earn technology and vocational certifications.

In 2016, he moved into a new apartment, the first permanent address he has had in nearly six years.

"Outreach and the people who work here changed my life," Dean says.

From a house on East New York Street in Indianapolis (above), staff and volunteers at Outreach strive to build family like connections with homeless youth.

Offering hope

Dean is one of up to 29,000 youth in Indiana who have experienced homelessness, based on an estimate by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, according to Eric Howard, founder and CEO of Outreach.

That number includes young people sleeping on friends' couches, in shelters, hotel rooms, abandoned buildings, under bridges and on streets. The Coalition for Homeless Intervention and Prevention revealed in its most recent annual homeless count that 24 percent of those reported as homeless in Indianapolis were between the ages of 14 and 24.

clients sort through the basics of life, including proper identification, transportation, jobs, housing leads, referrals to medical programs and job-training programs. But Outreach also "journeys with them" on a deeper level, sometimes over a period of years, Howard says.

"We try to build authentic relationships with our youth and help them cast a vision for their lives and align their dreams with the services that can help make them a reality," he says.



Homelessness is a complicated issue, and homelessness among young people – defined simply as a lack of fixed, nighttime shelter – is even more complicated, Howard says. Being a teenager or young adult is difficult in the best of circumstances as young brains are still developing higher reasoning skills. Without security and support, homeless youth are especially ill-equipped to cope with issues like joblessness, mental and physical illness, school failure, unhealthy relationships and sexual exploitation. Estranged from their families or aged out of the foster care system, they are most vulnerable because of their inexperience and lack of resources.

"Homeless youth are dealing with abuse, neglect, hunger and, of course, housing insecurity," Howard says. "We operate under the 'trauma inferred' model for all our clients. Homelessness is traumatizing."

For the past 20 years, the mission of Outreach has been to show homeless youth "the compassion of Jesus Christ," and instill in them the hope they need to move toward a life off the streets. Outreach offers hope through the practical – helping

A new "home" in 2017

The only direct provider in Indianapolis for homeless youth, ages 14-24, Outreach served 400 youth in 2016, says Howard. For the past nine years, Outreach operated out of a modest, and increasingly cramped, house on East New York Street.

In 2017, after a successful \$3.3 million building campaign that included a \$1.27 million grant from Lilly Endowment, Outreach expects to move just a few blocks away into a new, 11,000-square-foot facility that will greatly improve the way the organization serves its clients.

With its white picket fence and front porch, the old facility offered youth

Nearly 100 homeless teenagers and young adults come to Outreach each week – to share breakfast, do laundry, and receive counseling and other support. Outreach leaders are building a new facility to grow Outreach's capacity to help young people build stable lives.

“a little bit of home,” according to Anthony Dumas, Outreach’s in-house manager.

Dumas says the new facility will offer that same sense of comfort, safety and so much more: an expansive, functional kitchen, more bathrooms, showers, laundry facilities, counseling space, a chapel and more space for staff. The larger facility also will enable Outreach to engage more effectively the mental health services of Adult and Child Mental Health and the legal services of Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic.

“It’s really going to be wonderful,” he says.

For veteran volunteer Erin Becker, making breakfast for

A three-year, \$150,000 grant in 2005 helped strengthen staff and board capacity, technology and fundraising efforts. Two additional grants in 2010 and 2013 supported marketing awareness and development. In November 2015, the Endowment awarded a \$50,000 grant to help Outreach refine its service model and build capacity in its staff as it moved toward construction of the new facility.

Meeting the needs of homeless



40 or more in a new, modern kitchen with an industrial dishwasher is a big plus, but so is the ability to reach more homeless youth.

While she refills plates at weekly breakfasts, Becker also makes connections with the young people who come to Outreach. If she’s learned one thing over more than three years of weekly volunteer service, it is that these youth are lacking more than housing.

“People sometimes forget that they have spiritual needs, that they have never had families that encouraged them, or maybe even smiled at them. In many cases, they’ve been more or less homeless and hurting their entire lives,” Becker says. “My hope is that we will be able to reach more people and eventually break this cycle of hopelessness and poverty.”

The 2016 Endowment grant for the new facility follows more than a decade of support to help leaders at Outreach continue to understand homelessness among young people in Indianapolis and assess strategies to alleviate the problem.

youth is an ongoing challenge, but Outreach now is better equipped for the future in every way, according to Howard.

“We aren’t saying we get it right all the time, but we are pushing the boundaries of what has been done previously for homeless youth,” Howard said. “We’re grateful that Lilly Endowment has been willing not only to provide capital funding but also funding for capacity building and evaluation. To serve this population well we must have a deep understanding of their needs and know what strategies work and which don’t.”