

The Homeless Children's Education Fund Presents

# SUMMIT V: STUCK IN SURVIVAL

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR COUCH-SURFERS, TRAVELERS, AND OTHER HOMELESS YOUTH



## OVERVIEW

Homeless teenagers and young adults were the focus of the fifth annual summit hosted by the Homeless Children's Education Fund on November 14, 2014. Over 230 community members gathered at the Wyndham University Center in Pittsburgh to explore ways to better meet the needs of this largely invisible, highly underserved population.

Titled "Stuck in Survival: Building Support for Couch-Surfers, Travelers, and Other Homeless Youth," the day-long conference included more than a dozen lectures and panel discussions by

national experts, local leaders, and youth. Presentations called attention to the diverse face of homelessness, the trauma associated with the rough-sleeping lifestyle, and several emerging best practices for helping youth overcome instability and adversity.

The summit's name was inspired by a quote by a homeless 17-year-old, who said of his living situation: "You can't think about tomorrow for being so stuck in survival".

## LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

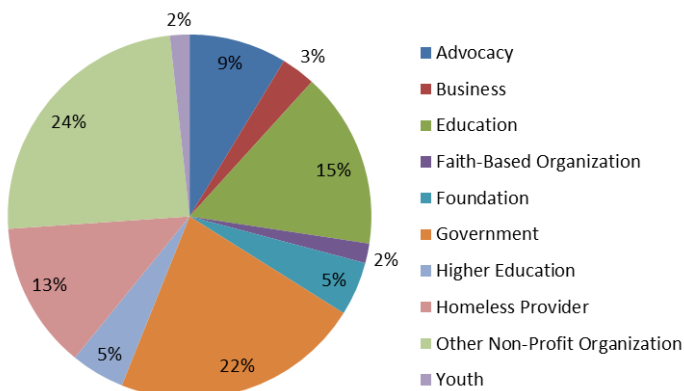
The Summit highlighted a research report commissioned by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services on the state of homeless youth in the Greater Pittsburgh area.

Report author Kathy McCauley noted that approximately 240 young people ages 18-24 are living homeless in Allegheny County, but cautioned that this estimate does not include couch-surfing youth or those who are young parents.

Ms. McCauley presented recommendations for improving service delivery to youth living on the streets, including increasing shelter options for this age group and opening a comprehensive drop-in center in the downtown area.



*Ebony Dwyer shared her personal experiences with homelessness.*



SUMMIT  
ATTENDANCE  
BY SECTOR





Mayor William Peduto and members of his administration attended the Summit.

## SUPPORT FROM LOCAL OFFICIALS

Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald both attended the Summit and pledged to support initiatives benefiting homeless youth in the region.

Mr. Fitzgerald recognized the Allegheny County Department of Human Services as a model for the rest of Pennsylvania and honored individuals and organizations in the community who have worked diligently on behalf of homeless youth.

Mr. Peduto criticized the traditional ways that the city has dealt with homelessness and offered his administration's support in implementing sustainable solutions to end youth homelessness: "This now has become a priority. What we need now is a game plan."

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—MAYOR BILL PEDUTO

## WHAT SUMMIT PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING

*"This event enhanced my compassion for homeless children. It also increased my motivation to do more to help homeless youth."*

- School social worker

*"[This event] assists me in maintaining empathy, and keeps me from giving up on the clients and families I serve."*

- Juvenile probation officer

*"We learned a great deal... The attendees were extraordinarily engaged with each other, the presenters were diverse and compelling, and the information was highly relevant and substantive. It gave us tools to better meet the needs of this underserved population."*

-Youth program director

## NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Dr. Wayne Centrone, physician and founder of Health Bridges International, an international healthcare organization focused on underserved communities, spoke about the global and national context of youth homelessness. Between 1.3 and 2.1 million youth ages 12-24 experience homelessness each year in the United States.

Dr. Centrone urged professionals and community members to understand how the trauma of homelessness impacts youth's brain development, behavior and opportunities. He stressed how genuine relationships based on respect and empathy can help youth become resilient. "When we treat the poor as objects of our compassion, we add to their poverty and impoverish ourselves."

In a lively presentation, Michigan educator Beth McCullough shared how she created the Roadmap to Graduation Program, a host-home initiative that provides housing, stability, and encouragement to homeless students in her district so they can graduate and transition to college or employment.

Ms. Mullough contrasted the high costs of youth dropping out of high school (an estimated \$292,000 is incurred by taxpayers per dropout over their lifetime) with the marginal cost of running her program (\$1,800 per student per year).

Her parting challenge to Pittsburgh came in the words of her late father, a lifelong public servant: "Would those who don't believe this can work get out of the way of those of us who are actually making it work!"



## YOUTH VOICES

Interspersed throughout the Summit were the first-person stories of young people. Ciarra Karnes gave a gripping account of her life as a homeless teenager, opening with the words of author William Paul Young: "Pain has a way of clipping our wings so we cannot fly."

Ms. Karnes spoke passionately about the impact of her mentors, including a guidance counselor, who helped her recognize her academic potential and gain the confidence and resilience to complete both a bachelor's and master's degree in psychology.

Dr. Jenny Amani spoke realistically about her tumultuous journey from homeless teen to physician and mother: "I don't have a hero story. I have a human story."

Dr. Amani called on the audience to become the caring, consistent role models she would have benefitted from leaning on as a struggling young woman.

"Without the fellowship and togetherness we displayed as hunter gatherers and nomadic people, we would not be here today. I like to think we did not accomplish so much together only to separate now, and maybe we should revisit the thought of being our brother's keeper."

Four young people from the



"I DON'T HAVE A  
**HERO** STORY.  
I HAVE A  
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- DR. JENNY AMANI



*Youth panelists and advocates share their stories of strength and resilience. Pictured from top to bottom: Ciarra Karnes, Joshua Diaz, Lenny Prewitt, and Tate (left), and Dr. Jenny Amani (right)..*

Pittsburgh area participated in a "Youth Voices" panel discussion, in which they opened up about the challenges of homelessness and engaged in candid dialogue with audience members about what makes an effective youth program.

The young adults stressed the importance of listening to youth, taking them seriously, and having a consistent presence in their lives.

Ebony Dywer, Tate, Shyquan Stern, and Joshua Diaz were honored with the HCEF Resiliency Award in recognition of their personal strength and willingness to share their perspectives.

Summit participants had the opportunity to hear additional youth voices throughout the day at the Hear Me listening station, an interactive display of audio recordings featuring seven young Pittsburgh residents speaking about what it's like to experience a housing crisis, obstacles they've overcome, and what supports they need to pursue their life goals.

The recordings, collected by HCEF and Hear Me staff at the Service Access for Youth drop-in in July 2014, are available for streaming online at <http://www.hear-me.net/portfolios/232>.



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## COMMUNITY AGENCIES ON THE CUTTING EDGE

Over twenty local professionals and advocates led breakout sessions on a range of youth-focused topics including health and safety, gender identity, education policy, foster care, and the role of law enforcement.

These sessions provided a forum for dialogue as well as an opportunity for local organizations -- such as Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, Familylinks, and ACTION-Housing -- to share current work and promising practices.

The Unsung Hero Award recognized the efforts of three individuals whose direct service has made a profound impact on youth experiencing homelessness in the Pittsburgh area: Dr. Jim Withers (Founder,



Lyndsey Sickler receiving the HCEF Unsung Hero Award. Pictured left to right: Bill Wolfe, Dr. Jennifer Amani, Lyndsey Sickler, Dr. Joe Lagana

Operation Safety Net), Lyndsey Sickler (Board Chair, Gay & Lesbian Community Center of Pittsburgh), and Joanne Goodall (Nurse Practitioner, UPMC Division of Adolescent Medicine).

## NEXT STEPS

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services announced the recent formation of a community task force charged with implementing the recommendations of Kathy McCauley's report.

Chuck Keenan, Administrator of DHS's Bureau of Homeless Services, is the lead contact for the task force, which will continue to meet monthly to strategize around implementing a youth point-in-time survey and coordinating services for unaccompanied youth. Interested organizations can get involved by contacting Chuck at: [Charles.keenan@alleghenycounty.us](mailto:Charles.keenan@alleghenycounty.us).

The Homeless Children's Education Fund and its partners are committed to improving the quality of life and educational opportunities of our community's most vulnerable teens and young adults.

We invite you to get involved! To learn how to nominate a young person for HCEF's Hope Through Learning Award, to volunteer as a youth mentor, or to be added to the Homeless Education Network mailing list to receive information about upcoming events, please contact HCEF at 412-562-0154 or [info@homelessfund.org](mailto:info@homelessfund.org).



Allegheny County Dept. of Human Services Administrator, Chuck Keenan.

## PARTICIPANT RESPONSE

WHAT WILL YOU DO OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS TO SUPPORT HOMELESS YOUTH?

Continue to be a part of the conversation by attending future Homeless Education Network meetings.

Share information with school counselors and administrators to identify and help students experiencing homelessness.

Be more aware of the signs of homelessness and make appropriate referrals for youth in need.

Collaborate with others and minimize red tape.

Find sources of employment for unaccompanied youth.