MISSION
The Youth Empowered Society prevents and eliminates youth homelessness through the synergy of youth, peer and ally partnerships. Our vision is that all Baltimore’s youth will easily access supportive services and stable housing to become powerful in their own lives.

VALUES
Safety. YES counters the traumatic stress of homelessness and poverty by creating a physically, morally, socially, and emotionally safe space that minimizes triggers for each person in the YES community.

Trustworthiness. YES strives to be true to our word, transparent, and dependable for each person in the YES community.

Youth and Ally Partnerships. YES practices collaboration and inclusiveness between peer and allied staff, board members, and others in the YES community through our support for leadership and skill development and use of consensus decision-making.

Dignity. YES practices a non-judgmental and kind approach, and relies on restorative practices to resolve conflict, to recognize the inherent worth and potential in each person in the YES community.

Wellness. YES supports the wellness of our youth and believes that our important work is made possible over the long haul by attending to our self and organizational care.

Anti-oppression. YES practices anti-oppression internally and externally through dialogue about privilege, equity, diversity, and power and a commitment to engaging in systemic change.

HISTORY
YES grew out of the work of the Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative (BHYI) Youth Leaders, a group of youth with personal experiences of homelessness that formed as an arm of the BHYI Coalition to help set its direction in 2009. Among other priorities, they identified the need for a comprehensive, “one-stop-shop” drop-in center for youth in a central Baltimore location, to be staffed in part by formerly homeless young adults with whom the youth could relate to and be inspired. The vision of the BHYI leaders was realized when YES opened its doors in October 2012. YES has continued to be staffed and led by formerly homeless young adults and allies since its founding.

YES Youth Founders provided the vision and foundational direction of YES, worked for the organization, and had direct experience of homelessness. We continue to honor their wisdom, passion, and dedication in creating this organization, their continuing to hold us accountable, and their commitment to ending youth homelessness.

Antonette Okanola
Bea’Trice
Davon “Dae Dae” Ferguson
Emmanuel Jackson
Luther Thompson
Maurice “Rees” Ayes
Nadja Bentley Hammond
Nick Jones
Samika Dewitt
Sergio “Money” Hopkins
Shawn Toyer
Thank you to the YES Community for standing with us and for your continued presence! As we evolve and reflect, we are so grateful for your time, your efforts, your love and your support.

COVID-19

The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic is felt hardest by those experiencing homelessness, in low-wage jobs, receiving under-the-table wages, and those living at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. We’ve seen that impact. Our youth who had once gained stable employment were unable to provide for themselves and their families. Shelters were less safe than they ever were. Neighborhood resources like ours at YES, a drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness, had to limit physical hours of operation to keep our communities safe. And a movement to virtual and remote engagement has magnified the digital divide and concerns around connectivity access. What many of us take for granted, such as reliable phone and Internet access, are now more critical than ever before. Overall, there are fewer spaces to access the same level of community and connection that sustain wellness, stability, and connection.

Our COVID 19 Emergency Response has:

1. Provided emergency housing for youth in hotels, via a partnership with Charm City Care Connection,

2. Provided secure housing supports to young people experiencing homelessness,

3. Initiated an emergency financial support fund to reduce the digital divide through the provision of phones, laptops and service plans,

4. Supported ongoing SELF discussion groups, youth leadership, and organizing work,

5. Provided emergency travel support to access critical appointments or interviews based on the restricted transportation system schedules due to COVID-19, and

6. Enabled access to work uniform assistance for newly employed youth.

To check out a recent report we completed in partnerships with Charm City Care Connection and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, visit the following: https://yesdropincenter.org/portfolio/something-to-hold-onto-experience-of-emergency-housing-homelessness-during-covid-19.

To donate to our ongoing COVID 19 Emergency Support Fund, currently with a focus on technology support for youth, visit the following: https://donorbox.org/mpn-youthempowerededsociety.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

We reassessed and overhauled our annual youth survey, structure and process – for the first time in YES’s history we included youth in the design of the feedback process. To better incorporate youth input and feedback we held Youth Focus Groups about programming and the direction of the organization’s growth as we reassessed our annual youth survey structure. This was a new process for YES. New survey questions were designed in partnership with youth. Youth were and are encouraged to continue to advocate for program change through youth feedback. Post focus groups, we compiled and analyzed the data collected and presented it to staff and youth. We then used the feedback during
a staff retreat to review, understand, and determine how to calibrate our services to accommodate youth feedback. Feedback loops have consistently been our model of obtaining information from our youth about our programs and their needs.

**OPERATING HIGHLIGHTS**

There has been a lot of administrative activity as YES prepared to transition to its own non-profit status. YES has now attained its independent status as a 501 C3 non-profit organizational. We transitioned from Strong City Baltimore to Maryland Philanthropic Networks as our fiscal agent. We are also raising capital funds, developing our donor database and building a reserve fund.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

As we continue to evolve upcoming plans include:

1. Youth directed strategic planning,
2. Investment in implementation of organizational shared power with youth,
3. Use of a new data system for evaluation,
4. Policy development,
5. Program support that is responsive to youth feedback and data evaluation,
6. Increased opportunity for youth engagement and leadership, and
7. A new location.

**THESE WERE YEARS OF CHANGE, LOSS, GROWTH, AND TRANSITION.**
As the central access point for youth experiencing homelessness in Baltimore City, our Drop-In services are a critical part of our work. It is the foundation of what we do.

YES provides a safe space to receive mail, do laundry, work on a computer, get some food or bus tokens, and connect with other youth and services. Through our case management services, we provide support from peers and adult allies to help youth meet their goals at their pace. This might look like assistance around obtaining identification, enrolling in school, navigating financial aid, accessing public benefits, advocacy in legal proceedings, accessing childcare, and connecting to employment and housing.

We constantly connect youth to various services and housing programs throughout the City if youth qualify. The best way for us to support most of our youth is to give them an extra resource boost or offer a short-term financial safety net. This often occurs when folks are employed or have some sustained income and would otherwise have enough money for their housing but are facing an emergency or complex financial challenge. We assist with security deposits, portions of rent, eviction prevention fees, furniture for new housing, and other emergency needs that would result in someone losing housing. Through Diversion funding, which will begin in 2021, we will be able to enhance these services for youth on the verge of entering the shelter system.

Our peer led, progressive engagement model has helped us build trust with youth and young adults quickly – and we know it counts.

### Impact FY19 FY20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>FY19</th>
<th>FY20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth Housed</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Employed</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth Provided Legal Support</td>
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<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Connected to Education</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

323 Youth Served in FY 2019

201 Youth Served in FY 2020
In December 2018 we facilitated a series of three focus groups with youth to determine how to best re-vamp our biannual youth drop-in survey. Input from the focus groups helped prioritize what types of questions to ask in the survey and the best language to use. The focus groups in and of themselves offered rich feedback on areas of improvement for YES’s drop-in services. Youth expressed that they liked the focus group format as a forum for sharing feedback and would like to have more opportunities to share feedback in small groups in the future. Input from the focus groups informed the structure and wording of the new youth survey. We worked with the Urban Institute to synthesize the results of the focus groups and create the new survey. Youth were asked to review a draft of the survey before it was finalized. Once finalized the survey was open over the course of two weeks and 34 youth responded. The notes from the focus groups as well as the results of the survey were presented to the staff at a staff retreat in February.

**STRENGTHS**

- Staff Dedication
- Familial Vibes
- Safe Space

**AREAS FOR GROWTH**

- Inconsistent Consequences
- Lack of Capacity – sometimes not enough follow through and follow up

During the retreat staff reviewed “areas of growth” feedback/suggestions pulled from the focus group sessions. In small groups staff brainstormed short- and long-term action items to address the feedback. Staff then came back together as a large group and created a list of actionable priorities and a timeline for achieving them. Following the retreat, the staff went through a separate process to identify areas of improvement in drop-in services, rapid re-housing, and staff support. Many of the concerns addressed through this process aligned with feedback brought by youth.

“I FEEL LIKE I CAN TRUST THE STAFF.”

- 94.6% Agree
- 3.6% Disagree
Harm Reduction is a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use.¹

YES has practiced harm reduction since its inception. It’s in the way we meet young people where they are, treat them with dignity and respect, prioritize their health, and support them in their decisions. We call it meeting youth where they are.

We’ve often learned from YES youth about trends in the drug trade in the city, and how they navigate their own survival within it. It allowed us to have honest conversations with young people, connect them to critical services, and educate them on how to use more safely if they decided to continue use. In 2018, we experienced a number of opioid overdoses our community and luckily, staff were able to successfully administered naloxone [an overdose prevention tool] both nasally and intramuscularly, which kept them conscious until the ambulance arrived. Together, youth and staff began receiving multiple safer drug consumption trainings and naloxone kits to deal with the increase in opioid overdoses, and applied to become an Overdose Response Program, granted by the Maryland Department of Health. We increased our case management team to include a case manager focused on harm reduction supports, and began to establish recurring dialogue with groups of young people about harm reduction, linking some of those young people to treatment.

In 2019, we lost several young people to overdose. These youth were our family, and the losses devastated us as a team. We took on the responsibility of reclaiming the body of one of these young people, who we’ve known for years, and fundraised to cover his funeral and repast costs. The emotional toll on our community was huge – and we remain deeply grateful to the outpouring of love and support.

We continue to fight to ensure safe, dignified spaces for ALL people, especially youth experiencing homelessness. For us, that looks like demanding services that help youth use more safely, offering opportunities for their voices to be heard, and providing multiple youth-centered pathways to support young people getting access to treatment on their terms, designed with them in mind.

Overdose Prevention Sites are a key part of this work. Check out the BRIDGES Coalition for more info: https://baltimoreharmreduction.org/bridges-coalition/

S.E.L.F. Community Conversations, evolving from the work done by the co-founders of The Sanctuary Model®, is a framework for facilitating conversations among small groups or in larger community contexts. It originated as an approach for understanding, preventing, and responding to trauma, which occurs at multiple levels – individually (i.e. neglect, violence), institutionally (i.e. foster care, criminal justice), and structurally (i.e. racism, sexism). We recognize both the impact of trauma and toxic stress while simultaneously celebrating and honoring autonomy, resiliency, and individual and community power.

As a framework, S.E.L.F. Community Conversations recognizes that most of the restorative powers needed to promote and support the growth and wellness of participants and communities resides in the collective wisdom and strength of the people themselves.

YES formally adopted this framework in 2019 and began receiving extensive coaching around its implementation. Through exercises and templates for facilitating conversations and responding to toxic stress, individual crises, and institutional and structural barriers, we create pathways to shared language, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility. We do this recognizing that thriving today is deeply important; while we simultaneously activate and organize toward creating the world we want to live in.

Through this work, we have begun to operationalize seven key commitments:

- **A Commitment to Nonviolence**: helping to build safety skills and a commitment to higher purpose
- **A Commitment to Emotional Intelligence**: helping to teach emotional management skills
- **A Commitment to Social Learning**: helping to build cognitive skills
- **A Commitment to Open Communication**: helping to overcoming barriers to healthy communication, learn conflict management, reduce acting-out, enhance self-protective and self-correcting skills, teach healthy boundaries
- **A Commitment to Democracy**: helping to create civic skills of self-control, self-discipline, and administration of healthy authority
- **A Commitment to Social Responsibility**: helping to rebuild social connection skills, establish healthy attachment relationships, establish sense of fair play and justice
- **A Commitment to Growth and Change**: helping to work through loss and prepare for the future
YES’s Workforce Development Program takes a direct service and systems level approach to help youth experiencing homelessness address needs related to paid employment, vocational training, and education. To increase employment, income and benefits, youth are provided with one-on-one job search supports, connection to paid job readiness programs and links to sector specific training programs. In case of job jeopardy, YES provides on-site intervention, conflict resolution, organizational staff training, and consistent contact with the supervisor.

Partnerships are critical – and as a result, YES strived to increase partnerships that more directly addressed youth needs and fostered more youth leadership. It was essential that these partners were closely aligned with YES’s values, especially around cultural representation, power dynamics, race equity and inclusion. Expanding our workforce team to include an Employment Specialist was a major factor in this work.

Due to the increased cost of living and stagnant wages, there is a need for YES youth to have multiple jobs and / or revenue streams. We have seen that when organizations pay youth to study for their GED, pay youth to enroll in job trainings and internships, and pay youth to attend positive events and spaces in the city, where they can build community and develop leadership skills, youth will have significantly more improved money management skills and often have more of a financial cushion to grow to sustained success and permanent housing. When youth have those revenue generating sources in place, that come with positive relationships and skill building, obtaining and maintaining long term employment, and housing, becomes much more feasible.

On a workforce systems level, YES participates in The Mayor’s Office of Employment Development’s Practice Advisory Group and Associated Black Charities’ Community of Practice on Race, Equity, and Inclusion. Ultimately, we hope that our partnership will continue to provide potential employer and training partners with the opportunity to learn about the assets of our youth, to build more compassionate and communicative relationships with their clients and employees while promoting their success, and foster environments of critical reflection that can begin to directly address the (often systemic) root causes of unemployment and underemployment.
Rapid Rehousing is designed to help individuals and families quickly exit homelessness and return to permanent housing through:

1. Housing identification and landlord recruitment,
2. Rent and move-in assistance, and
3. Rapid rehousing case management and services.

This program centers the principles of Housing First – that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live – and from that place of stability, other needs can be tackled. We believe that youth experiencing homelessness should be housed as quickly as possible, without requirements or stipulations placed on them to obtaining housing.

Our Rapid Rehousing Program’s work has been highlighted in the Rapid Rehousing Handbook released by Point Source Youth, a national organization dedicated to ending youth homelessness by implementing youth homelessness interventions\(^2\).

This is a continually developing program, as its implementation for youth and young adults is relatively new, and its potential impact nationally for youth is continuing to be assessed and analyzed. As one of the few housing options for young people, we continue to shift and rethink the program’s implementation at YES, and hope to integrate learnings from our implementation into education and advocacy efforts. For example, according to literature and experts RRH is explicitly NOT an anti-poverty program. But our data and experiences at YES demonstrate that we can’t separate the trajectories of youth receiving RRH assistance from the realities of structural racism, the legacy of redlining, and living in poverty in Baltimore City.

We’ve been intentionally working to scale back the size of this program, to focus on enhancing the supportive services for youth within the program. In 2020, we developed a comprehensive YES Rapid Rehousing Manual, worked on a Program Evaluation to be released in early 2021, and set a housing advocacy agenda. Items within that agenda include: [1] increasing pipelines into long-term employment for newly housed youth; [2] strengthening legal protections for youth against landlords who respond infrequently and inconsistently to maintenance requests and youth and staff concerns; and [3] enhancing access to behavioral health care and crisis support.

\(^3\) Point Source Youth Rapid Rehousing Handbook, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DQniO0Q5BwRfkybubYX1C7G0v5GttMGY/view
YOUPH ADVOCACY

Over this time, we organized ourselves around a few specific goals, supporting YES youth to:

1. Become more educated about the political process on a city and state level;
2. Build confidence in telling their stories on their own terms;
3. Strengthen their self-advocacy skills through training and workshops; and
4. Build a youth-led movement around ending youth homelessness and the issues that intersect with it.

YES youth have:

1. Participated in educating community members on minor consent to housing and safer drug consumption spaces;
2. Attended organizing classes with United Workers;
3. Started a story collective around telling their stories through writing and art; and
4. Continued to educate the broader community through participation on panels, attending conferences, and speaking at public hearings.

Youth attended Baltimore City Children and Youth Fund Task Force meetings, were grant reviewers for Baltimore’s Promise, and participated in community input sessions on Substance Abuse Treatment with Behavioral Health Systems Baltimore.

We have also established key legislative partnerships, including with Free State Justice, Advocates for Children and Youth, and Healthcare for the Homeless. We are members of several coalitions working with young people across the city, and now have youth leads attending many of these coalitions – updating staff members about their work and recruiting other youth to attend.

KEY ADVOCACY INCLUDED:

- Actively engaged State legislators in support of the Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services, which passed in March 2020 and became law on July 1, 2020 (HB206/SB207)
- Testified in support of the Baltimore City Council Trauma Responsive Care Act that passed and was signed on February 2020.
- Supported an active bill called Mandatory Mental Health Training First Responders and Law (HB1470/SB454)
- Served on the Youth Action Board for the Baltimore City Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project created by the United State Department of Housing and Urban Development. Baltimore City was awarded $3.8 million to develop and implement a local plan to end youth homelessness.
- Participated in coalition work around State accountability and increased funding for the Ending Youth Homelessness Act.
- Supported the High School Graduation Requirements – Students in Foster Care or Homeless Youth (HB754/SB564).
Community,

After three years as Executive Director, I am writing to share that I am transitioning out of my role at YES. Coming into the role, I was charged with several key priorities:

• Ensure that YES attains its independent 501c3 nonprofit status.
• Find a new space for the drop-in center.
• Stabilize the budget and increase the amount of funds going directly to youth.

And we have much to celebrate!

In the last three years, we’ve more than doubled our direct support for youth - through rental assistance, stipends for job training, and funds to support youth telling their own stories and advocating for systems change.

We’ve attained independent status over the summer we will be working with Maryland Philanthropic Network for limited back office support. And after over 4 years of searching, we’ve secured a new space in downtown Baltimore! Stay tuned for how you can support our move. Alongside youth and staff, we are grateful to partners, volunteers, and the philanthropic community for supporting YES in achieving these essential goals. Thank you for having our back.

There is much to look forward to in the coming months.

Our drop-in center resources have dramatically increased through funds through the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project - as we plan to provide increased support to youth outside of the shelter system. Later this year, we will release a report on our Rapid Rehousing Program. And mid-next year, our new drop-in center will enable us to provide more focused support to young people experiencing homelessness who may be looking for work, a place to play with their children, or just space to relax and be.

Our staff and Board work tirelessly to be the YES that young people dream for us to be - a place that is theirs. Thank you for your enduring belief in that vision. I am so proud to have been a part of that journey.

More to come!

In deepest love and solidarity,

Blair
YES TEAM

BLAIR FRANKLIN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

GERARDO BENAVIDES
HOUSING PROGRAM COORDINATOR

NICK BROOKS
WORK DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

CIERA DUNLAP
SYSTEMS NAVIGATION COORDINATOR

GRAY HARGROVE
DROP-IN COORDINATOR

GREG KING
OPERATIONS MANAGER

NICOLE MEYERS
RAPID REHOUSING CASE MANAGER

SANTIAGO PAEZ-PARDO
EMPLOYMENT SPECIALIST

BRIAN ROBINSON
PEER INTERN

COLBY SANGREE
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

WILL TOUCHETTE
RAPID REHOUSING

JAS TURK
CASE MANAGER

TERRYLynn TYRELL
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
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Jennifer Lee, Teacher, Park School of Baltimore  
Elvis Guzman, Program Officer, Health and Human Services – The Abell Foundation  
Shantay Guy, Executive Director – Baltimore Community Mediation Center  
Maceo Hallmon, Executive Director – East Baltimore Youth and Family Services Bureau  
Lolah James, YES Graduate

Kumar Jayasuriya  
Knowledge Management Attorney

Jennifer Lee,  
Teacher, Park School of Baltimore

Eliseba Osore, Program Director – ShareBaby

Didey Washington-Henry, YES Graduate

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Mayor's Office of Human Services: Homeless Services Program
Robert W. Deutsch Foundation
Open Society Institute-Baltimore
Pepsico
Starbucks Foundation
T. Rowe Charitable Foundation
The Abell Foundation
The Archdiocese of Baltimore, Catholic Campaign for Human Development
The Blaustein Philanthropic Group
The Frank E. & Miriam Loveman Foundation
The Fund for Change
The Grandchildren of Harvey and Lyn P. Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund
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