



Episode 5 – “Valley Youth House” Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts, Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. Our podcast will amplify the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Matt Butensky:

And I'm your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. Thanks for joining us for this episode of I Will Be Your Voice. On today's episode, we are speaking with Michele Albright and Reet Kaur with Valley Youth House. Valley Youth House provides an array of youth services including emergency shelter, transitional housing, street outreach, mentoring, and LGBTQ+ services. They envision a world in which every young person belongs to a nurturing community. So, we want to welcome Michele and Reet to the podcast. Welcome. How are you today?

Michele Albright:

Great. Thank you so much for having us.

Matt Butensky:

Hey Reet.

Reet Kaur:

Very well. Thank you so much.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. Well, again, thanks for being with us. We're super excited for today's conversation and we wanted to go ahead and get started just talking about Valley Youth House. For our listeners who might not be very familiar with the services and programs for youth that Valley Youth House offers, so what would you like them to know about your organization?

Michele Albright:

Well, first, we are not just a house. Often when people hear Valley Youth House, they think of our shelter. Don't get me wrong, our shelter in Bethlehem has been and continues to be our flagship program, but we have so much more to offer. Our programs range from street outreach, emergency shelter, LGBTQ+ services, and in school programs to behavioral health, prevention programs, mentoring and housing programs. Our mission is to be the catalyst for youth to achieve their desired future through genuine relationships that support families, ensure safe places and build community connections. Excitingly, we are celebrating our 50th anniversary this year, and over the last 50 years we have served over 400,000 youth across 14 counties in Pennsylvania.

Matt Butensky:

Wow.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's huge.

Matt Butensky:

That's a lot, over 400,000. I love that though, that you shared that. When we think of your organization's name, we think shelter, but you do so much more. That's really cool, thanks for sharing that. Tell us more about what you both do with Valley Youth House because as you said, you offer a lot of services and programs, so what do you both do at Valley Youth House?

Michele Albright:

So, myself, Michele, I am the director of Emergency Services for Housing in the Lehigh Valley, which encompasses Lehigh and Northampton Counties, the cities of Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton. I oversee the continuum of services from street outreach to shelter to transitional housing to permanent housing, which includes our rapid rehousing programs for homeless youth and families. I have been with Valley Youth House for 24 years. I like to tell the younger staff that I've been working here since the 1900s, which is true. I started in 1999 as a case manager in one of our behavioral health programs, family-based mental health. In 2002, I moved over to independent living, assisting in the startup of our first supportive housing program for homeless youth. I guess the rest is history. This is where I found my life's passion in serving homeless youth in the community.

Matt Butensky:

What's interesting that you share that, Michele, this is episode five of our podcast. Almost every guest we've had has been doing this work for decades, and so it just I think demonstrates how important this work is and how it really is a passion for us and a purpose for us. But yeah, that's interesting. Thanks for sharing about that. Reet, tell us more about what you do.

Reet Kaur:

Yeah, of course. So again, my name is Reet, I am a licensed professional counselor in the state of Pennsylvania and my official title at Valley Youth Health is clinical coordinator. I've been with the agency for going on four years now, but my goal is to get here and be able to say I've been here since the 2000s, just like Michele being here from the 1900s. As the clinical coordinator at the shelter specifically, I oversee all therapeutic services, so that includes individual, family, and group therapy services at the shelter. I also work towards fostering education in our current graduate and undergraduate students that are working towards becoming therapists in the Valley and pretty much all over Pennsylvania. Additionally, I work very closely with other clinicians and therapists in the agency to see how we can make sure that we're doing all of our work through a trauma-informed lens and really put that into place in all providers that we work with, even if they're not specifically doing housing work. So that's a little bit of a tidbit of what I do here.

Matt Butensky:

Cool. So how do youth and families find your services and how do they access your services typically?

Michele Albright:

Typically, there's many different ways to access our services. One is through referrals, through schools, through other community agencies. It's very dependent on the program, through the

local counties, mental health, children and youth services, through police departments through JPO. It really is dependent on the specific program and what the requirements are.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome. So as you both know, Valley Youth House is very near and dear to my heart as I used to be a life skills counselor. But going back, as we talked about the 1900s, Michele in 1970, we know that the Lehigh Valley area had its first single shelter, so we wanted to explore more of the housing services that are offered. Are you able to tell us more about those different shelter services and programs that are offered in the area?

Michele Albright:

Absolutely. What is great about Valley Youth House is that our programs that specifically serve homeless youth offer the full continuum of services from street outreach to permanent housing. On the far left of that continuum, we have street outreach. Valley Youth House currently has five street outreach programs that cover six counties. There's the one in Lehigh and Northampton County, that serves Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton. We have a street outreach program in Bucks County. We have one in the city of Philadelphia. We have a street outreach program in Dolphin County and then one in Montgomery County. These programs are completely mobile, offering services wherever the youth are, laundromats, bus stations, schools, community agencies, drop-in centers, shelters, homeless camps, et cetera.

From street outreach, then we have our youth shelter in Bethlehem, which serves homeless, runaway, displaced youth, ages 12 to 17. This is the only public youth shelter in the Lehigh Valley, and what I mean by public is that everybody in the community has access to this service. You don't need a specific diagnosis or a specific referral or a specific insurance to receive this service. We have had youth come from, as far away as New York State and Mississippi stay at our shelter. It is a 21 to 30 day program depending on the funding source, and we offer a wide range of services from basic service like food, shelter, hygiene to group, individual, family counseling, recreational activities, case management and referrals to other services. And most important, we offer advocacy.

Many times a youth who comes to the shelter, this is their first touch with quote-unquote "the system", again, it's that safety net. We are able to find out what is really going on with a particular youth and get them connected with the appropriate services. From our shelter program, we have our continuum of care funded transitional housing and rapid rehousing programs for homeless youth ages 18 to 24. Transitional housing is supposed to be a short-term temporary housing with the goal of moving into permanent housing within 90 days. And when I say permanent housing, I'm referring to helping the youth find their own apartment in the community where they enter into a lease contract with the landlord. That would be our rapid rehousing programs. Valley Youth House then offers rental assistance and case management anywhere from six to 24 months depending on that youth's particular needs.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's awesome. The amount of help and support there is with all those different housing programs and services and I know that you touched base on the street Outreach project, which is also known as the Synergy Project. I had the opportunity to shadow a few times in the Dolphin office one, and let me tell you, that really opened your eyes to really get in the nitty-gritty details of going into abandoned buildings, jumping through windows, maybe ripping your jeans, that may or may not happened to me going in those places, but Pennsylvania has accounted for over 4,000 unaccompanied youth. So, when you're talking about our Synergy

Project that Valley Youth House has, what are those things that are happening day in and day out on the ground when they're out looking for homeless youth?

Michele Albright:

Yeah, our Synergy Project, again is our street outreach program and they are a true safety net program. They're completely mobile, offering a wide range of services to youth experiencing homelessness, housing instability and/or abuse or domestic violence. Statistics have greatly increased over the past few years. I mean, since January alone, we have identified 70 new youth that they have worked with. The program used to be focused more in Allentown, but now they are finding youth across the Lehigh Valley. They have connections with every high school in the Valley and get referrals from all the schools, not just the schools like in Center City Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton. They know and work with all the homeless liaisons in the Valley. They are mobile coordinated entry access site, which means that they complete assessments with youth to get them on the waiting list for housing. They could pay for hotel stays, food, emergency supplies, clothing, et cetera. They're a true emergency service. So I'd like to give just a couple examples of some of the work that they're actually doing. They were doing kind of their runs, just walkabouts in the woods where homeless camps are known to be where they came across an individual who was unconscious, severely beaten. They basically saved his life. They were able to check him for his needs, call emergency services. He wasn't a youth, but he was an adult, and if it wasn't for them being out there in the woods looking for homeless youth, he most likely would have passed away. So there was a runaway youth from Monroe County that the Synergy Project was able to identify in Allentown and they were able to contact the local authorities and Monroe County authorities and get her returned to where she was supposed to be. They are truly saving lives in the community.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, they really are, and just the ways that they get around, I know that the team will go on bikes, they'll walk, they'll run, they'll go and use their Synergy Project vans. So they truly are mobile in every aspect and really on the ground in and out each day.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, our program, ECYH, we really emphasize with school homeless liaisons, the importance of working with unaccompanied youth and services for them. And so your Synergy Project is such an amazing resource for those youth that truly need it. So thanks for sharing about that. And now a short message. Make plans now to attend the 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference this October. The conference will be held October 11th through 13th, 2023, at the DoubleTree by Hilton, Pittsburgh Cranberry, located in Mars, PA. The 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference is a unique learning opportunity to support children and youth experiencing homelessness and students experiencing foster care. Harness the power of your community, your service recipients and yourself in a cohort of diverse professionals. There is no cost to attend. Any professionals working with children and youth experiencing homelessness or children and youth experiencing foster care should plan to attend. Continuing education credits are available for attendees. For more information, visit our conference website. You can find all of our upcoming events at www.centerforschoolsandcommunities.org.

We saw on your website, we were browsing around your site in preparation for our discussion today, and we really saw how you embrace the principles and practices that acknowledge that all people are to be valued and treated with dignity. Why is this particularly so important working with the youth you serve at Valley Youth House?

Reet Kaur:

So I'll go ahead and field this one, Michele. It's so incredibly important because the youth that we serve come from such a diverse range of backgrounds. It's incredibly vital to understand and respect and value their different lived experiences by us acknowledging a value across the diversity of our client base, we can support our youth and their families on an individual level, so it's not like a cookie cutter type of model. Diversity, equity and inclusion are really the key to us achieving our mission at Value Youth Health. We do believe that diversity, inclusion and equity really leads to a higher satisfaction and empowerment. It brings ideas that promote creativity and growth and really ensures that it's an environment where everyone's unique skills and perspectives are being valued, hence why there's such a big importance and constant conversation surrounding these types of values.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, we could probably talk about that topic for so much longer, and we want to a little bit specifically about one of the projects you have at Valley Youth House. We recognize Pride Month in June, and we know that statistically LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately represented as experiencing housing instability. So can you tell us about the services or projects that Valley Youth House offers for LGBTQ+ youth?

Reet Kaur:

Absolutely. So, one of our programs is called Project Silk and Project Silk is located in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and it is one of the only programs in Pennsylvania to have funding through AccessMatters. What that means is that Project Silk is able to have a program that not only provides community connections to LGBTQ community individuals, but also it has a specific project and help that are provided in high risk and hard to reach populations. So basically there's HIV and STD prevention and testing. There's teen pregnancy prevention and education, there's case management, there's LGBTQ health disparity information as far as how to support and create a community. There's youth led and adult supportive groups that are run and really Project Silk, Lehigh Valley is very big on having open discussions of health and social topics, and it's a drop-in center. So basically it's a safe space for members of the LGBTQ community to come in and have services and therapy and case management and basically have a safe space that is theirs within their community. And it's located in such a niche location in Allentown that you can go in there and learn about sex education and healthy relationships and really just have more support in your community and cultivate these wonderful relationships that you carry throughout the rest of their lives.

Matt Butensky:

Thanks Reet. Yeah, I know a lot of what today we're speaking of, we're speaking about the services that Valley Youth House offers in Eastern Pennsylvania, but we hope today's discussion for our other listeners in their organizations, they'll check out how you're doing some of the work and hopefully that will inspire ideas or strategies of how they can also reach this population of youth. Before we move on, I wanted to talk just a minute about collaboration with schools because as you know, our podcast is education based, and so we wanted to know how Valley Youth House collaborates with schools for the education of students experiencing homelessness and for education stability purposes or just collaboration in general, how do you collaborate with schools?

Reet Kaur:

So one of the things that we pride ourselves on is working very closely with our homeless liaisons, as everyone should be aware, each school district has a homeless liaison that works with youth that are experiencing homelessness within their homeschool district. At this shelter

specifically, we have an educational specialist, and then at our other programs we have case managers and life skills counselors that really work closely with the schools to make sure that there is not a lot of disruption with the youth for when they come into our program. We work very closely with many different departments of different schools to ensure that the youth are attending school and doing so in a way that is most conducive to them graduating and being successful. And I apologize, what was the second part of your question?

Matt Butensky:

I think you mostly covered it. I was just wondering how you collaborate with schools and how you work towards school stability and limit disruption. And really just like you said, it's really a relationship building piece, being available, having people know who you are, what you do in the community. And Michele, you sharing that you've served over 400,000 youth it sounds like of course you're doing that and working with schools is important. A recent guest we had was talking about how school is home for many students, and so we know that you provide housing as one of your services, but school is a first or secondary home for a lot of students as well. So I think that collaboration between what you offer and schools is so important.

Michele Albright:

Valley Youth House also has school-based programming, where we have therapists that go in the schools and provide counseling, therapeutic services to students who are identified in the schools. And I know for them, that touch for these kids, the amount of referrals that are made to children in youth services for what the students are reporting to the therapists is so high. And also when you're talking about the school as their second home, yes, a lot of these kids, that's where they get their breakfast and lunch, it's at the school or sometimes it's getting the clothes or getting just all the services they get through the school is so important. So Valley Youth House as an agency is very active with the schools, I know recently our Synergy Project was going out to the local high schools doing presentations to the staff so they're aware of the services that they are able to provide. We get a lot of referrals from school guidance counselors or just concerned teachers to our shelter. So if we cannot offer them the service they're looking for at the shelter, what we do is connect them with one of our programs or another program in the community that can help them with what they are looking for.

Matt Butensky:

That's awesome. It's so important for homeless liaisons to know what services they have in their local communities and you providing presentations I'm sure helps eliminate some of those education barriers around what services are available. So thank you for doing that for our schools.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

We are so thankful that we've had you guys here today. Thank you for sharing about resources and programs, it was super informative. I'm hopeful that many of our listeners will look and see what Valley Youth House programs are near them and how they can best advocate for their youth. But is there any information that you guys have left out maybe about activities or programs that you want to be able to share out with our listeners?

Michele Albright:

Yes, there is one specific program I wanted to talk about. It's probably our newest program, we recently started a program for female identifying youth who are adolescent survivors of human trafficking and/or exploitation. This program is called THRIVE and it stands for Transitional Housing Resilience Independence Victorious Empowerment. It is a confidential safe house using a therapeutic model, a group home that creates a family-like environment. Here at Valley

Youth House, we believe that their journey is their own and that we are there to support it. In this program, they create their own found family with each other and they live together in this community that they build together. Funding is through a grant, through the Department of Justice and also through county children and youth agencies. It's one of only a few programs like it in the state. It has an extremely low barrier to entry. The youth are coming straight from the life. We partner with Homeland Security, the FBI, District Attorney, VAST, Bloom, and Bloom is an adult program, is a program for adult survivors, crime victims, counsel, Lehigh Valley Anti-Trafficking Collaborative, and the list goes on and on. The staff who work in this program have actually been out on stings with Homeland Security ready to meet with the youth and see if they want out of the life and then give them the option to do so. So that's been pretty exciting.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Wow, what a program and a need that is really needed to be met. I'm so excited that you guys did that. I don't really know of many MPA at all that do that, so that's amazing. Did you just start it this year?

Michele Albright:

No, we started it in, I think, in the middle of the pandemic.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Wow.

Michele Albright:

We opened the first house and then we realized it wasn't just in the location. So then we ended up, we had a donor who purchased a site that was a little more in the outskirts of the Lehigh Valley, and since then, I think they just celebrated recently, the one-year anniversary of them opening it at that house. So, things are going well. It's trial and error, and we're learning as we go, but there need to be more programs like this out in the state of Pennsylvania and in the country. And the reason we wanted to do this funding, because we realized, we started seeing these youth showing up at our shelter and there was nowhere for them to go. We were serving them at our shelter, but it really wasn't the best place for them. And then we realized there were no other programs like that out there, so then that's where this idea came from. So it's really exciting to see it come to fruition.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That is super exciting. Well, congratulations on the one year and to many more years that come. Hopefully it'll continue to develop in Pennsylvania and countrywide. So with that message, we're going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you Michele and Reet for being with us today. We really enjoyed all the information that you provided for us and our listeners.

Michele Albright:

Thank you so much for having us here and this opportunity to talk more about Valley Youth House and the work that's being done through the organization. Really appreciate it.

Reet Kaur:

Thank you so much.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you, Michele and Reet. So, to learn more about the programs and services you heard about today from Valley Youth House, please visit valleyyouthhouse.org. Thank you for listening

to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed our episode with Valley Youth House. Please check back and tune again.