



THE BRIDGE FOR YOUTH



CATHOLIC CHARITIES

St. Paul and Minneapolis



Providing Pathways to End Youth Homelessness



Evergreen Youth & Family Services



LAUNCH MINISTRY



## Who We Are

The Youth Services Network (YSN) is a statewide collaborative of runaway and homeless youth serving organizations committed to developing shared, collaborative strategies to respond to youth homelessness. Formed in 2003, YSN includes 15 different youth serving organizations across Minnesota.

## What We Do

YSN member organizations respond to the needs of at risk and homeless youth across Minnesota by providing outreach, drop-in, housing and other services. The leaders of YSN member organizations meet regularly to share best practices, develop collaborations and work on a shared vision, including legislative priorities, for responding to youth homelessness in Minnesota. YSN member organizations created and are committed to following the Nine Guiding Principles of Youth Work: journey oriented, trauma informed, non-judgmental, harm reduction, trusting youth/adult relationships, strengths based, positive youth development, holistic and collaborative.

## Who We Represent

YSN organizations serve runaway and homeless youth in Minnesota. On any given night in Minnesota, approximately 5,800 youth are homeless. Of these youth:

- 35% are pregnant or parenting
- 73% are racially diverse
- 47% have been homeless for a year or longer
- 90% have experienced trauma or abuse
- 68% have experienced at least one out of home placement

## Accomplishments

In 2015, YSN launched the nation's first app (ysnmn.org) providing real-time information regarding emergency services for youth. The app includes geo-location services to connect youth with shelter, outreach workers, drop-ins, and other services they may need.

In 2023, the Youth Service Network successfully advocated for the largest increase to the Homeless Youth Act since its inception in 2006 as well as increased funding to the Safe Harbor and other critical investments necessary to end youth homelessness.

**YSN Chairperson** | Lisa Mears, President, The Bridge for Youth,  
l.mears@bridgeforyouth.org

**YSN Policy Committee Co-Chairs** | Beth Holger, CEO, The Link,  
bholger@thelinkmn.org and Katherine Meerse, Executive Director, Avenues,  
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**CATHOLIC CHARITIES**  
Twin Cities

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February 15, 2024

Chair Dave Pinto  
House Children & Families Finance & Policy Committee

Chair Pinto and Members of the Committee,

In the 2023 legislative session, Minnesota made significant investments in homelessness through the Emergency Services Program (ESP), Homeless Youth Act, shelter capital, and more. As a leading provider of emergency shelter services in the Twin Cities region, I write to share our gratitude for your leadership and to highlight impacts of this increased public funding for our agency and the people we serve.

New data emphasizes the importance of these investments, too. From 2022–2023, Catholic Charities saw a 37% increase in the number of people served at our Saint Paul Opportunity Center (SPOC) alone.

- Flexible ESP operating dollars have supported hot meals and necessities for the nearly 8,800 individuals seeking services at SPOC, an emergency day shelter in downtown St. Paul that operates as a one-stop service hub for neighbors in need, 7 days a week. Funding also supported increased wages for shelter staff to ensure we can recruit, train, and retain trauma-informed, culturally competent staff.
- Our Minneapolis Opportunity Center, an emergency day shelter previously at risk of closure in the Elliot Park Neighborhood, received funding to keep doors open through June 2024 while more permanent funding solutions are explored. More than 3,000 individuals visit this Opportunity Center each year to access fresh meals, housing and employment navigation services, veterans benefits, and more.
- We maintained a behavioral health team at our Dorothy Day campus in downtown St. Paul, providing extra support for people experiencing homelessness who are also navigating mental health concerns.
- A dedicated investment in Catholic Charities' Homeless Elders program has cut waitlist times in half—from 4 months to 2 months—helping the growing number of older adults experiencing homelessness more quickly navigate their housing and waiver options.
- A shelter capital grant will help fund needed repairs to bathrooms at our Higher Ground Minneapolis shelter, providing more accessible and dignified accommodations for our shelter guests.

Separate investments through county-led proposals have also supported the continuation of Diversion, a single-point-of-entry system working to prevent people from entering the shelter system by helping them identify other housing solutions, and Focus Forward, an enhanced shelter program launched during the pandemic to provide more intensive support for shelter guests with acute needs.

These programs are recognized as cornerstones of the region's emergency shelter system, but while we celebrate what recent investments have helped us achieve, we know there is still more to do.

As demand for our services increases, we know that many state investments made in 2023 were one-time appropriations, and the need to explore additional and more predictable funding models for shelter operations still exists.

We look forward to continuing these conversations with you throughout this legislative session as we work to build a more robust and sustainable emergency shelter system that advances our shared goals of making homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lorna Schmidt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lorna Schmidt  
Director, Public Policy & Advocacy  
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