

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## YAKIMA NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH SERVICES

### Organization Description, Mission and Program

Yakima Neighborhood Health Services (YNHS) is a non-profit community health center which has been serving the Yakima Valley in Central Washington since 1975. Our mission is to provide affordable, accessible, quality health care, promote learning opportunities for students of health professions, end homelessness and improve quality of life in our communities. We have seven locations throughout the county in Yakima, Sunnyside, Granger, and a mobile medical unit. Our health care services include primary medical, dental, and behavioral health services, pharmacy, optometry, maternity support services, and nutrition education for women and young children. Our target populations are low income individuals and families, including the homeless. Our homeless programs include street outreach, medical respite care, permanent supportive housing, emergency services assistance, and a youth winter weather shelter. We are the largest provider of homeless services in the Yakima Valley and the county's coordinated entry point for homeless services.

In June 2016, YNHS opened Yakima County's first drop-in center for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth, ages 13-23. Located on the main health center campus one block from the downtown Yakima corridor, "The Space" offers culturally appropriate mentoring, leadership skill development, social interaction, advocacy, health and behavioral health services, tutoring, housing assistance and self-sufficiency support. Staffed by a Program/Case Manager, Psychologist, and volunteers, "The Space" is a safe, comfortable place where LGBTQ youth can come to participate in a group activity, eat a snack, socialize with other LGBTQ youth, and access services, all without fear of bullying, criticism, or ridicule. A total of 62 unduplicated LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth have visited "The Space" in the last year, and most have become regular participants. Feedback has been very positive.



### Engagement with LGBTQ Community

The resource center for LGBTQ youth was born from a conversation held at the 2015 Pride Festival. YNHS' outreach team had participated since the Festival first began, providing information about services and helping people enroll in health insurance. The Central Washington Pride Foundation, which was one of the Pride Festival's sponsors, had been talking about the need for a resource center aimed at LGBTQ and sexually non-conforming youth for some time. Members of Central Washington Pride Foundation took the opportunity at the

Festival to approach Annette Rodriguez, YNHS' Homeless and Housing Services Director, about the idea. They were looking for a partner to make the idea a reality. They recounted how there were so few resources and places to go when they were teens and struggling with coming out. Each one had felt very isolated. They wanted a safe place for LGBTQ youth to meet others dealing with their same issues and interact with mentors who had been there.

Annette agreed to take the idea and request for a partnership to the administration. She and some of her staff presented the idea, asking if it was within the mission of the organization. The leadership team thought it was. Anita Monoian, President and CEO encouraged them to pursue the idea, determine how it would best fit within the array of services YNHS offered and outline a plan. Rhonda Hauff, COO/Deputy Director did some homework and discovered that an estimated 40% nationally of homeless youth were LGBTQ, many displaced from their homes due to family rejection. This statistic indicated that a significant number of YNHS' current teen and young adult homeless clients would likely benefit from a LGBTQ resource center. That meant it was a logical extension to the array of homeless services currently being offered. Anita championed the idea with the Board of Directors and was given the green light to pursue the project. She was asked to develop a detailed plan with a proposed budget and revenue sources.

Rhonda, Annette, and Leah Ward, Communications Manager, began meeting with members of Central Washington Pride Foundation to discuss the project. In February 2016 they held a retreat to develop the structure of the program, role of an Advisory Committee, funding opportunities, programming, the name of the resource center, the role of adult mentors, communication and volunteers, as well as a kick-off fundraiser. The Steering Committee now became the Advisory Committee. A few weeks later the Administrators and Committee members visited the Oasis Youth Center, a drop-in center for queer youth in Tacoma, to get ideas about program structure, funding, and services. Rhonda submitted grant applications to the Pride Foundation, Yakima Valley Community Foundation, and Legends Casino to get the project funded.

With the help of Leah Ward, and funding from the Yakima Valley Community Foundation, the fundraiser was planned and held on April 29, 2016 at the site of the proposed drop-in resource center. YNHS' administrative support services had recently moved into an office building across the street from the clinic leaving a 2-story converted home on the corner of the campus available for the new program. It was hoped that 25 people would show up for the reception. "We were all



shocked" when about 100 people attended and donated over \$5,000. Attendees included elected officials, business owners, the arts community, local education leaders, and non-profit leaders. One of the Advisory Committee members spoke passionately about the importance of The Space as a resource for LGBTQ and sexually nonconforming youth. This was the first indication that "The Space" would have broad community support and would perhaps not be as controversial as

expected. As Leah later said, “It was such an emotional, feel-good evening. We really felt we were embarking on an important new journey with The Space.”

A few months later, in June 2016, The Space officially opened. A ribbon cutting ceremony was held in August. The turn-out was excellent, with members of the LGBTQ community well represented. YNHS’ Board Chair, Don Hinman, cut the ribbon assisted by Wyatt Kanyer, Program/Case Manager for The Space.



The Advisory Committee began meeting monthly. Members include a lawyer, accountant, performing arts director, and an educator. Each are influential in the community and have helped to promote the program. The committee helps to identify speakers, resources, mentors, and outreach opportunities. Members also help make outreach presentations about The Space and its services whenever possible.

### Co-Design and Co-created Solutions

As previously described, the members of the Central Washington Pride Foundation worked collaboratively with YNHS to design the program. It was important to make sure that The Space was first and foremost a welcoming environment. Having it located in a house helps with that ambiance. Everyone, including youth, receiving services at YNHS are accepted “where they are at” without judgement or requirements to engage in certain behaviors or participate in specific programs. It is up to the individual to choose what services they want and in which programs they’d like to participate. We emphasize positive and supportive relationships. This philosophy and practices helped the LGBTQ community view YNHS as a credible, reliable partner. We also strive to make our youth, and all patients/clients, feel safe. Our intake materials for The Space were designed to include the Safe Zone logo. A “Hate Has No Business Here” poster with a prominent “All are Welcome Here” and a rainbow heart graphic are prominently displayed at The Space.

Youth who come to The Space are greeted by the Program/Case Manager or volunteer and welcomed. The youth is given a tour of the house, usually by a peer participant, and in the process, services and activities are described. Part of the tour involves an introduction to the announcements board, which features upcoming events. The calendar for the month, which is posted nearby, is also reviewed. During the tour, the youth is introduced to the other participants utilizing the drop-in center. These are all important components of making each person feel welcomed and safe.

Once the program was up and running and the youth began to regularly use the services, the participants decided to form their own Advisory Council which they named Pachem. This was a way to “formalize” their input into program development. The participating youth chose the

name, decided that parliamentary procedure would be used to conduct meetings, and chose not to have specific leadership for now so that everyone could participate equally. The council is still fairly new but the participants are learning that their input is important and it shapes what activities occur. For example, Pachem decided to recognize Pride Month last year by holding a vigil to remember the Pulse Nightclub massacre. They laid 49 red carnations, one for each of the victims. They chose red carnations because they signify love, adoration and pride. This event gave participants a way to express and recognize the emotional impact of the massacre and a way to express unity, pride and a sense of community. This positive healing step would not have occurred without their input.

Another example of LGBTQ participant involvement in shaping the program is the “Agreements Board.” The agreements board is basically a posting of the “ground rules” which were created and adopted by program participants. The thought is that when attendees come to The Space, they agree to honor what is posted on the board. Examples of posted agreements are “Choose kind words,” “Seek positivity when possible” and “Be proud.” The idea came from Oasis, a queer youth center in Tacoma. When a youth visits The Space for the first-time part of their tour includes a stop at the Agreement Board where the agreements are reviewed. During the intake process the individual is asked if they would like to add anything to the agreements board. They are also asked to agree to keep each agreement. New agreements are also added during Pachem meetings. This makes the Agreement Board more meaningful and as a result there has been little conflict among participants.

### How We’ve Addressed Systematic Inequities that Affect Health

Locating “The Space” within YNHS made sense because of our integrated approach to providing services. We are a federally funded community health center that has been providing services in the Yakima Valley since 1975. Our health care services include primary medical, dental, and behavioral health services, pharmacy, optometry, maternity support services, and nutrition education for women and young children. We are the Health Care for the Homeless federal grantee for Yakima County, and as such have been providing medical, dental, and behavioral health services to the homeless, including runaway, at-risk, and street youth since 2005. We are now the largest provider of homeless services in Yakima Valley. Our homeless programs include street outreach, medical respite care, permanent supportive housing, emergency services assistance, and a youth winter weather shelter. The fact that we provide health care, behavioral health and homeless services in an integrated system was important to this project. It is well documented that 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ. A comprehensive analysis of published research (Corker, et.al 2010) found that “LGBT youth are at a greater risk for depression, suicide, substance use, and sexual behaviors that can place them at increased risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) when compared with non-LGBT adolescents.” Transgender youth were found to “often suffer from depression, suicide attempts, risky sexual behavior, violence, HIV infection, and homelessness “. This information told us that the combined experience of providing services for the homeless integrated with medical and behavioral health services was very important. YNHS also had well established relationships with the schools, colleges, universities, and social service agencies within the county. Our

Program Manager is a trained case manager experienced in providing trauma informed care and utilizing motivational interviewing. We also involved our Psychologist in developing the program and he provides on-site individual counseling. He will begin holding twice weekly discussion groups on a variety of topics identified by the participants. The medical clinic is adjacent to The Space and is open until 6:30 pm making it easy for the youth to access medical care. Health education presentations on topics such as safe sex, STDs, and nutrition, are incorporated into the program,

What we have found is that this integrated approach is critical. Upon entry into the program 66% of the youth that utilized The Space last year reported having contemplated suicide or had engaged in self-harm; 43% reported feelings of loneliness or isolation; and 32% reported feelings of sadness or depression. 61% reported having been victims of bullying, physical abuse, or a crime such as robbery. However, we know The Space has made a difference. On the annual survey of program participants, 50% self-reported they were able to connect to medical or other health services (dental, counseling) they needed and 88% self-reported their mental health had improved or greatly improved as a result of participating in the program.

### Organizational Culture and Way of Working

As an organization, YNHS has a history of responding when there is a need in the community. Partnering with others and strong collaborations have also been part of our philosophy and culture. When YNHS first responded to the needs of the homeless we helped found the Homeless Network of Yakima County which is comprised of over 40 service providers, school liaisons, churches, government agencies, and concerned citizens. The group meets monthly to coordinate services and collaborate on joint projects. That's just one example of the many partnerships we engage in on a daily basis. This reputation was one of the reasons the Central Washington Pride Foundation approached us for this collaboration.

### Most Significant Challenges, Obstacles, and Missteps

The most significant challenge has been balancing the safety and security of the youth utilizing The Space and publicizing The Space and its services. The board and administration have been concerned that The Space would be a target for hate and violence so haven't wanted to draw attention to it. Part of this fear comes from all the negativity the organization has endured about serving the homeless and knowing the conservative nature of the Yakima Valley. Balancing these concerns with the need to get the word out so youth can access the program has been carefully accomplished. To date, no problems related to The Space have occurred. Outreach has focused on the schools and working with counselors and school liaisons to connect with students who might be interested in and benefit from the services. We've also informed the various social service agencies, mental health and health care providers in the area about the services. We have avoided publicizing The Space through advertisements or other forms of publicity. There is no sign, just the rainbow heart in the window. So far, this approach seems to be working.

Funding has also been a challenge. We don't charge the youth for any of the services at The Space. We are continually writing grants to obtain the funds to cover program costs. Most grants only provide one year of funding which doesn't provide much stability. We are able to use some

of our Health Care for the Homeless and Emergency Services funding but they do not cover the total costs of the program. We recently were able to expand hours at The Space to 36 hours, six days a week, with a three-year grant from the Office of Homeless Youth (OHY). We will continue to pursue all avenues for long term funding as well as short term grants to fill in the gaps.

We encountered no obstacles in putting together this project. Everything just fell into place and we were able to begin offering services within a year of first being approached by Central Washington Pride Foundation.

So far, we don't believe we've made any missteps.

### Positive Changes

Traditionally conservative, the Yakima Valley seems to be increasingly more accepting of the LGBTQ community. None of the problems we feared from the public have materialized. We've experienced no harassment, protests, threatening letters or phone calls, graffiti, or violence. These are all things YNHS has experienced since we began serving the homeless. The youth have been very safe and comfortable at The Space.

There are other signs of increasing acceptance. The Pride Festival and parade are big community events and are well attended. One of the most popular forms of entertainment are the Drag Shows which are staged at the Seasons Performance Hall. These shows are well attended and covered by the Yakima Herald with many pictures in the social scene section of the newspaper. It is often entertainment that leads the way to better understanding and acceptance.

Things are changing in the schools as well. Counselors seem to be more accepting of LGBTQ students and those who are questioning their gender or sexual orientation. While bathrooms in the schools are not yet unisex, they appear to tolerate students utilizing the restroom of their choice with no challenges. Our psychologist has also had some success with family reunification of youth. With counseling, the families have been able to accept their child back with better understanding and acceptance of their lifestyle.

These are small but very important steps. We are fortunate to have had the opportunity to collaborate on establishing The Space during these times.