

Larkin Street Youth Services ... IN BRIEF

Closing the College and Career Readiness Gap for Homeless Youth

Larkin Street's strategic plan provides a roadmap to drive the outcomes of homeless youth in San Francisco higher, setting a new bar for youth, our agency, and the field as a whole. Through an intensive year-long process of analysis and reflection, Larkin Street identified the need for intensified education and employment services—offered in concert with stable housing, health, and wellness support—as the key to supporting positive long-term outcomes for homeless youth once they exit our services. These outcomes, measured one year post-exit, are:

- safe and stable housing;
- two years of post-secondary education;
- sustainable, career-track employment at a livable wage; and
- physical and emotional wellbeing.

The Learning Centers: An Innovative Approach to College and Career Readiness

The Learning Center model, designed to promote wellness while accelerating youth's college and career readiness through an intensive six-month program, is a key component of this support system. This model combines academic preparation, experiential learning, mindfulness practice, and industry-based career exploration. Content is delivered using blended learning, an innovative approach that utilizes technology to provide individualized instruction, allowing youth to work at their own pace. This unique combination of learning strategies helps close the college and career readiness gap for homeless youth, many of whom have been disconnected from formal education and mainstream employment for long periods of time and face a multitude of barriers to re-engaging with those systems. The model addresses these barriers holistically, intervening at the intersection of wellness, housing, education, and employment. The Learning Center model is central to Larkin Street's goal to put homeless youth on a permanent pathway off the streets, out of poverty, and towards self-reliant adulthood.

Background and Context

Youth Disconnection from Education and Employment

The degree of youth disconnection from the workforce is at unprecedented levels nationwide. While some improvements have been seen in labor market participation since the Great Recession, today just over half of young adults ages 18 - 24 are currently employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The picture is even starker for homeless youth who have limited academic attainment and minimal work experience. In San Francisco, a mere 16% of homeless youth surveyed reported they had a job, paid internship, or other type of employment, compared to 52% of the general population of transition aged youth. Regardless of their employment status, 38% of youth reported needing job training and employment support. (Applied Survey Research, 2015).

Education is key to career-track employment. However, most homeless youth are disconnected from educational systems and have been off-track educationally for an extended period of time. This includes long periods without school attendance or enrollment, often culminating in youth dropping out prior to completing a high school degree. Only 41% percent of homeless youth surveyed in San Francisco during the 2015 Point in Time Count had completed high school or received a GED, compared to 61% of the general youth population. (Applied Survey Research, 2015). The prior count in 2013 found that while 72% of homeless youth stated they wanted to further their education, only 20% were currently engaged in educational activities. (Applied Survey Research, 2013).

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But even a high school diploma is not enough to secure a sustainable career in today's market. A growing body of evidence show that individuals with a high school diploma have few viable employment opportunities, limited potential for advancement, and reduced potential for future earnings. Most of the workforce in the past three decades has been in fields requiring at least a college degree (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). And this trend will only intensify: by 2020, 65% of all jobs nationwide will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2014). Three of the fastest growing occupations - STEM, healthcare, and community services - also have the highest demand for postsecondary education and training. Still, a four-year degree is not the only path to these careers. By 2017 there will be an estimated 29 million career track jobs nationwide available to individuals holding a two-year Associates degree or an occupational certificate. (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2012).

The Need to Address Wellness and Social Connection

A sound education and career-track employment are essential building blocks for any young person's success, but even the most motivated of disconnected young people face a host of logistical barriers to re-engaging, including a lack of financial resources, personal and professional networks, and support systems. Youth who are currently or have previously been homeless are the most extreme example of disconnected youth. Histories of abuse, neglect, and trauma and factors such as poverty and poor health can serve to compound youth's disconnection from the mainstream systems and pathways that are meant to help them make a positive transition to adulthood and employment, and create profound barriers to re-engaging. The very skills that enable young people to survive on the streets - from disrupted sleep to substance use - are maladaptive in a learning environment. Recent research has shown that even once reconnected to educational systems, the impacts of homelessness on educational attainment linger even after a youth is stably housed. (Institute for Children, Poverty, & Homelessness, 2016).

Programs to Support Disconnected Youth

These young people need support in connecting to education and employment pathways that work for them (Hossain and Bloom, 2015). In recognition of the barriers that disconnected youth face, many educators are now calling for approaches that combine career-oriented technical education, rigorous academic work, and experiences that create a clear path to educational and occupational goals while building the skills necessary for success in both domains (Visher & Stern, 2015).

A scan of programs to support disconnected youth found that successful interventions shared some common features, including: the use of financial incentives; strong links among education, training, and the job market; the use of youth development approaches; comprehensive support services; and post-program support. The same report found gaps in programs and services designed specifically to support and motivate youth - particularly older youth lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills - in reconnecting to education and the job market. Meanwhile, successful programs also addressed the developmental needs of youth through leadership opportunities and spaces within which they could develop trusted relationship (Treskon, 2016).

Education and employment programs for homeless youth must concurrently address the common co-factors that bar them from reaching their full potential. This requires a multifaceted approach that interrupts their current trajectory, provides stabilization, encourages wellness and social connection, and creates opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed for independent adulthood.

“
*We need services that help you describe who you are and what you like to do.
We need mock interviews, resume and cover letter help. Help defining
a career focus. A test to figure out: what am I passionate about?*

”
- LGBTQ youth
(Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families, 2016).

Larkin Street's Approach: The Learning Centers

What is a Learning Center?

Larkin Street's Learning Centers were created to address and support the specific needs of homeless youth disconnected from formal education and mainstream employment systems. Piloted in 2014, refined and expanded in 2015, Larkin Street now operates three unique Learning Center career tracks (healthcare, hospitality, and technology) to close the college and career readiness gap for homeless youth. The goal is to provide youth with not only basic education and job readiness training, but a fundamental understanding of a particular high-demand industry, enabling them to deepen their critical thinking, develop practical skills, and discern a clear pathway toward future education and potential careers in that sector.

Infused throughout this model is a positive youth development approach that builds on youths' strengths, fosters positive relationships among peers, and provides the support needed to build their leadership skills. Relationship building is an important component of the Learning Centers, and indeed of Larkin Street's model as a whole. Many of the young people Larkin Street serves have not had long-term positive adult relationships and developing trust and rapport is key to getting them engaged in programming. Essential to accomplishing this is staff members who are skilled in working with diverse groups of youth. The Learning Center model, with its intensive, six-month cohort structure, provides an ideal venue for youth to develop positive relationships both with staff members and with their peers. By concurrently addressing wellness, life skills, and college and career readiness, the Learning Centers provide youth the tools, support, and stability they need to be successful in school, work, and life.

A Bridge to Intensive Programming

The Learning Centers provide a bridge between Larkin Street's low-barrier engagement or point-of-entry programming and the more structured, intensive programming found in the agency's housing programs. Youth who are not yet ready for employment or formal education, or who are unsure about their plans in that regard, and who need support in working towards a consistent schedule, are ideal candidates for the Learning Centers. The six-month term of the program gives staff time to continuously support youth around consistent attendance and participation; a savings and incentive structure serves to reinforce that work and allow youth to earn income while in the program.

Staff have found success in working both with youth who are housed in one of Larkin Street's transitional housing programs and with those who are in the shelter and in the process of applying to move into more stable housing. By embedding the program within Larkin Street's housing programs, education and employment staff are able to do coordinated work with housing case managers and therefore offer youth wraparound services and a deeper linkage between the domains of housing, education, employment, and health and wellness.

Core Components of the Learning Centers

The Learning Center program is rigorous and structured, requiring each participant to commit to an intensive curriculum consisting of six hours of instruction a day, five days per week, over the course of six months. Up to twelve youth may enroll in each cycle. This cohort-based approach and small class sizes help to build a sense of community. A blended learning approach to academics means that youth can work at their own pace: while most youth have completed secondary school and are working towards post-secondary readiness, others may be working towards obtaining their GED or developing their basic literacy and numeracy skills.

A savings and incentive structure serves to reinforce consistent attendance and participation and allow youth to earn income while they focus on the nearly full-time program. Participants can earn cash incentives of up to \$75 per week (plus a \$25 gift card) based on their attendance and engagement in programming; a further \$250 can be earned on a monthly basis towards their savings, totaling a potential \$2,400 in cash and \$1,500 in savings over the course of the six-month program. These incentives also offer a tangible place to begin discussions on financial literacy and management with youth, many of whom are disconnected from mainstream financial systems.

The Learning Centers employ multiple learning strategies to support youth in progressing towards the long-term outcomes of education, employment, and wellness. **Core components include:**



Academic Preparation

- Teaching in English language arts, social studies, science, and math to enable youth to make significant gains towards college readiness
- Partnership with Sylvan Learning utilizes technology to provide individualized instruction, allowing youth to work at their own pace
- College tours clarify the path towards post-secondary education



Career-Based Learning

- Career technical education and training in a high-demand sector offers nationally recognized certifications and related job skills
- Professional guest speakers and career-oriented outings give youth real-world insights into their chosen field
- Sessions target the development of basic job readiness, financial literacy, and other skills for



Experiential Learning

- Mindfulness practice hones attentiveness, self-awareness, and positive physicality
- Outward Bound and Wildlife Associates outings enhance leadership, teamwork, and empathy, and help to build trust and a sense of community.
- Community-building Restorative Practices curriculum builds and sustains positive bonds between youth and enhances social and emotional development in a team setting



Technology Literacy

- Training in Microsoft Office, Google Apps, digital presentations, and general technology give youth the digital literacy skills needed to succeed in today's job market

The partnerships underpinning the program with Sylvan Learning, Outward Bound, the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, and Wildlife Associates represent the innovative mix of interventions Larkin Street has identified to concurrently address the major barriers homeless youth face to learning. In this holistic approach to education and employment, the integration of mindfulness and community building is as essential as the skill building academic component in supporting transformative change.

Program Results

Seven Learning Center cycles were held between the launch in March 2014 and the publication of this report in July 2016, providing 75 youth with the building blocks they need to close the college and career

Experiential Learning Partners and Approaches

- **Outward Bound** is the nation's leading provider of outdoor, experiential education. Its evidence-based approach teaches the values of compassion, integrity, excellence, inclusion, and diversity. The results develop character, leadership, and a commitment to service. The Outward Bound model also develops resilience, which helps mitigate the effect of trauma. Larkin Street partners with Outward Bound to offer its proven experiential education intervention to Learning Center youth over the course of three day-long sessions per cycle.
- **Mindfulness** is the intentional, accepting, and non-judgmental focus of one's attention to the emotions, thoughts, and sensations occurring in the present moment, which can be cultivated through meditational practices. (Baer, 2003). Larkin Street partners with the University of California - San Francisco (UCSF) Osher Center of Integrative Medicine to deliver its 'Mindfulness for Urban Youth' curriculum, developed

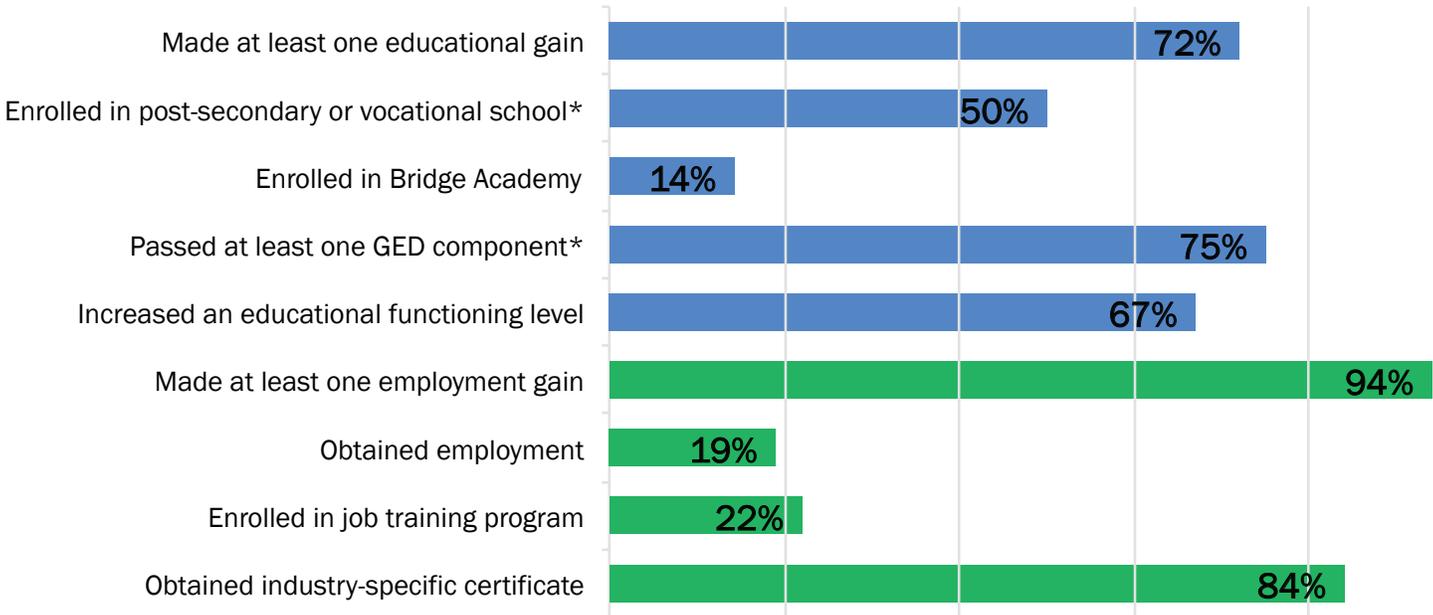
readiness gap. Larkin Street is now in the continuous quality improvement process of assessing and refining the model. Preliminary results from youth completing the Learning Centers, highlighted below, are promising.

Accelerated College and Career Readiness

Closing the college and career readiness gap for youth who have been disconnected from formal education and mainstream employment for long periods of time is a key objective of the Learning Center model. Incremental educational gains are measured through the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), administered before and after each Learning Center cycle. Other significant educational gains include earning GED components, enrolling in Larkin Street’s Bridge Academy program for support in transitioning into college, or enrolling in post-secondary education. While many youth are not yet ready for employment in their field of choice by the time they complete a Learning Center, Career Technical Education training and the opportunity to earn sector certifications leave them well prepared for success in focused training programs such as Larkin Street’s Employment Training Program.

- specifically for this population. Learning Center youth participate in up to four hours a week of focused mindfulness practice per cycle.
- **Wildlife Associates** is 120 acre wildlife sanctuary for non-releasable animals in Half Moon Bay that offers transformative experiences and activities in a unique setting. Its on-site At Risk Youth Program integrates environmental education and mindfulness; over the course of three day-long visits Learning Center youth learn about the animals, explore the sanctuary land, and participate in group discussions and rituals. This programming seeks to increase youth resilience, improve self-awareness and confidence, and support youth as they develop trust and a sense of connection with one another and with staff (Public Profit, 2016).
- **Restorative Practices** is a philosophy based on the importance of strong relationships, the idea that the community is responsible for the well-being of all of its members, and the premise that everyone has and deserves dignity and worth. It provides a framework from which to interact and work with both youth and each other, emphasizing a restorative approach that nurtures cooperation, collaboration, and accountability. The restorative approach involves using language based on care and compassion within a process that helps youth build character, confidence, and community.

Youth accelerated college- and career-readiness through education and employment gains



* note: GED data is presented only for those youth who were working towards their secondary education. Similarly, post-secondary and vocational enrollment data is presented for youth who already had their GED or HS diploma.

“

The best thing about the Learning Center was I was able to get support in what I need with studying and career. I was able to access the computer/classroom to study extra hours for my exam. The teachers are very helpful and always listen to their students. I feel welcomed and my voice is being heard by my teacher and my classmates. I have opportunities to explore my strength and skills, myself and my career path.

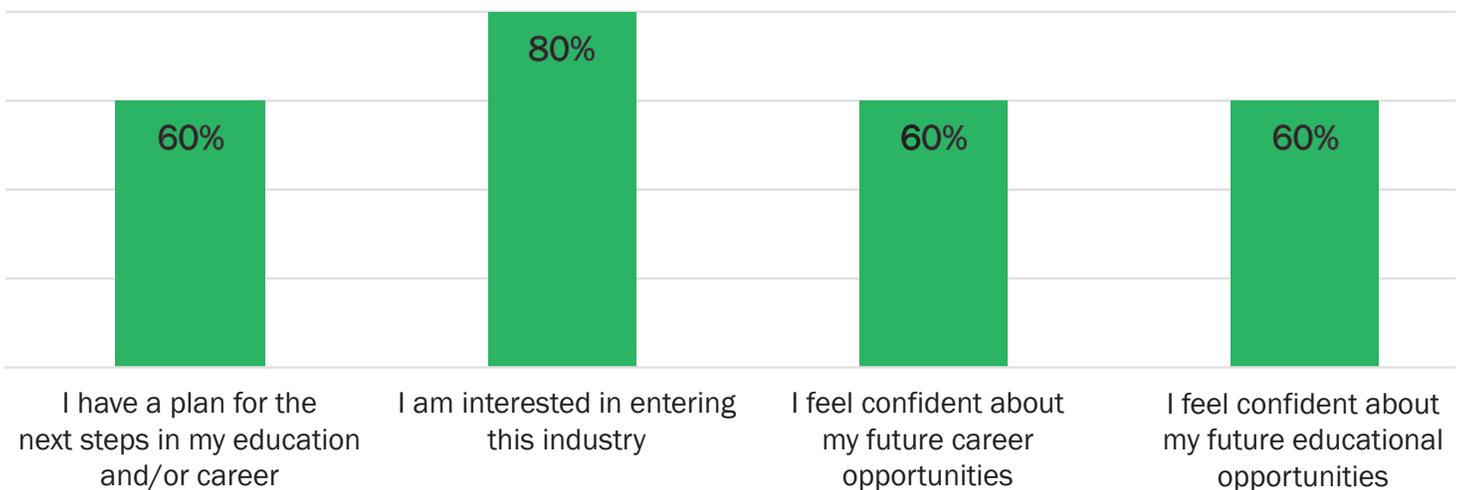
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- Learning Center participant.

Clearer Paths towards Careers

The Learning Centers help youth build a solid understanding of careers in their field of interest, and to clarify the paths toward those careers. All youth completing a Learning Center develop an individual plan outlining the next steps to further their education and career goals. Youth also develop cover letters and resumes tailored to their desired field.

Youth clarified the paths towards careers in their fields of interest



“

I felt supported with my NRFC (Customer Services and Sales) Certification program; with my level of understanding with hospitality by many aspects and knowledge by teachers; with food and field-trip outing to make sure it's enjoyable and safe; with support in my mental health throughout/during six month program.

”

- Learning Center participant.

“

My next steps are to attend the Bridge Academy program to prepare myself for college and then further my education at CCSF in the fall.

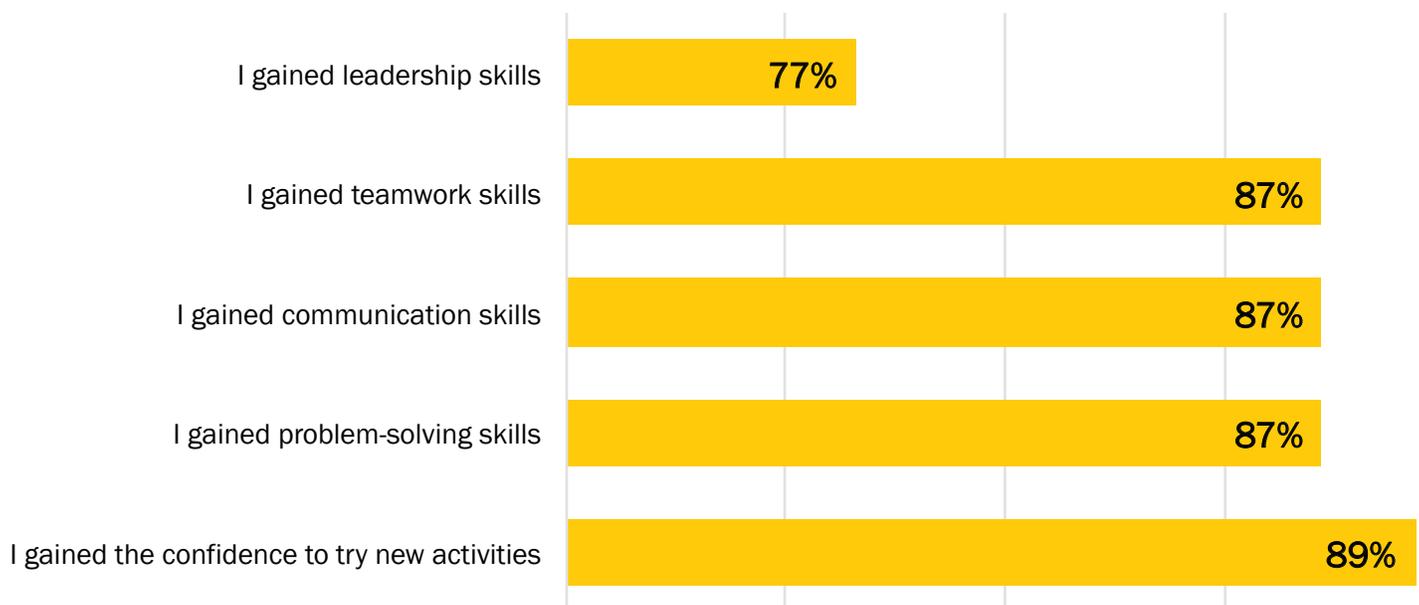
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- Learning Center participant.

Leadership, Teamwork, and Communication Skills

Central to the Learning Center model is the development of leadership, communication, and other soft skills that underpin college and career success. These skills are particularly important to develop among the transition aged youth the program serves. While these skills are nurtured throughout all of the Learning Center's programming, the experiential learning component of the program provides a particularly rich venue for these skills to be developed. Outward Bound activities challenge youth to push beyond their comfort zones; meanwhile, the Restorative Practices approach to the work helps to build and sustain those skills in real-world situations.

Outward Bound activities built leadership, teamwork, and communication skills



o Highlights of the course:

“seeing others participate that ordinarily did not want to participate “
“getting to know everyone a little better”

o What youth learnt about themselves:

“that I can do whatever it is if I put my mind to it “
“being able to accomplish my goal of climbing to the top even if I failed at first “
“that I still have a lot to learn and share with the world”

Additional Building Blocks for Success

Many homeless youth are disconnected from mainstream financial systems like banks and may have poor or non-existent credit scores, which may in turn force them to rely on costly money order, check cashing or payday loan services. The savings and incentive structures embedded in the Learning Centers give staff a venue to provide support around budgeting and banking. Meanwhile, financial literacy classes offer Learning Center youth additional building blocks for success in their education and employment futures. Topics include: Financial Aid and Scholarships, Monitoring Credit Reports, Savings and Money Management, Managing Credit and Debt, and Stock Market Investing and Risks.

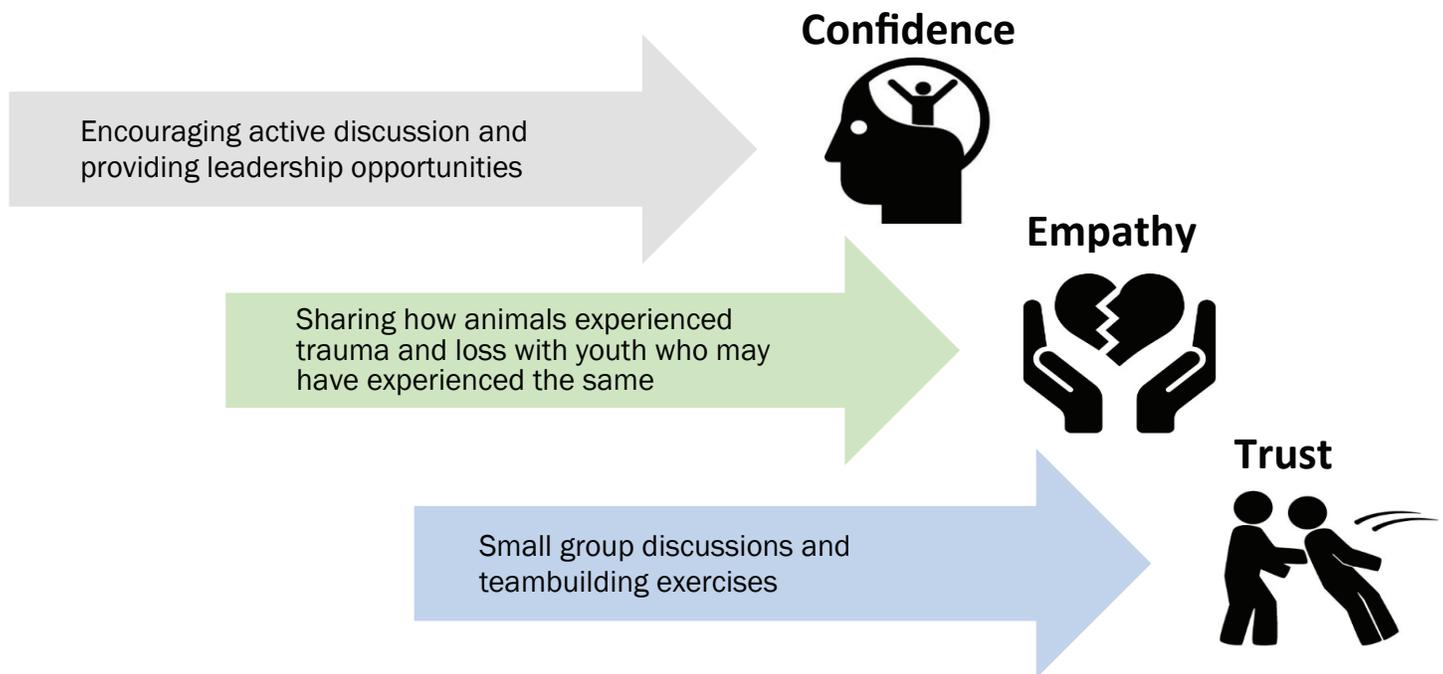
Youth developed financial literacy and other skills key to education and employment success



Improved Emotional and Social Wellness

Education and employment programs for homeless youth must also address the common behavioral health barriers they face. These youth often have a high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress-related symptoms, compounded by histories of abuse and trauma. All youth responding to a pre-test questionnaire distributed at two recent Learning Center cycles reported some level of anxiety, including over 50% with moderate or severe anxiety, while 84% reported depression, including over 50% who reported moderate or severe depression. The experiential learning programming of the Learning Centers is carefully designed to address and support these needs. Outings to the Wildlife Associates sanctuary helped to (re)connect youth to nature in a manner that builds confidence, empathy, and trust among the cohort. Meanwhile, weekly mindfulness practice honed attentiveness, self-awareness, and positive physicality. Participants saw meaningful improvements in their sense of isolation and their levels of stress and anxiety as a direct impact of this programming.

Wildlife Associates outings built confidence, empathy, and trust



“

Since our youth are at risk of homelessness or currently experiencing homelessness, their days are often packed full of accessing resources and planning their next moves while ensuring their safety and sometimes making truly difficult decisions. Having a space of their own to stretch and sit and be for one moment can be foreign and uncomfortable in the beginning, but youth quickly take advantage of the lessons they're being taught. [...] I've seen youth use the [...] practice when they are escalated and give themselves that extra moment to decide what they really want to do.

That alone is priceless to me. Giving young people the knowledge and skills to work with their mind and bodies instead of against them is empowerment.

”

- Larkin Street staff regarding mindfulness practice

Conclusion

Improving long-term outcomes for homeless youth includes getting them on a path out of poverty and toward a sustainable, living-wage career. However, these youth have experienced multiple factors that led to their homelessness. They lack stable housing and struggle on a daily basis to survive and meet their basic needs and must contend with other barriers that have a significant impact on their ability to reach self-sufficiency. They are disconnected from the mainstream systems and supports that are meant to help them make a positive transition to adulthood.

Education and employment programs for homeless youth must therefore concurrently address the common barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential. If we are to be successful in closing the college and career readiness gap for these young people, we must also support them in making a successful transition to stability and adulthood, one that includes self-sufficiency and overall well-being in addition to economic stability. In doing so, we ensure that the talents and contributions of all young people can be fully realized. And that makes our communities that much stronger.

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The mission of Larkin Street Youth Services is to create a continuum of services that inspires youth to move beyond the street. We will nurture potential, promote dignity, and support bold steps by all.