

Student-run youth shelter set to open

news

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By Varun Goyal, deputy news editor

Young people experiencing homelessness will soon have a new shelter option thanks to two former Harvard University students.

The Y2Y shelter, slated to open its doors in late November or early December, will provide case management services, short-term housing and emergency beds for people between 18 and 24 years old. The facility will be located in the basement of the First Parish Church in Harvard Square.

“We are trying to build a more welcoming space that’s safe for everyone,” co-founder Sarah Rosenkrantz said.

Y2Y will house 22 beds that individuals can use for up to 30 days, as well as several one-night emergency beds. Throughout their stay at the shelter, guests will have the opportunity to talk to case managers to make plans – including finding jobs and moving into other housing – for their time after the shelter.

At first, the shelter will be open from December through April to coincide with the months when student volunteers will be at Harvard. The shelter will be the first for homeless youth to be run entirely by student volunteers. Co-founder Sam Greenberg and Rosenkrantz hope to have the shelter open for longer each year.

Privately-run shelters for young adults, like Y2Y, are rare, according to Elisabeth Jackson, Executive Director of Bridge over Troubled Waters (BOTW), which runs a shelter of its own. BOTW has worked with local homeless youth

for 45 years, and the organization is on the advisory board of Y2Y.

To address that rarity, Rosenkrantz and Greenberg decided in 2012 to take on the project of creating a shelter for homeless youth. The duo drew inspiration from the time they spent on the staff of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter during their undergraduate years.

“We learned that there are a lot of young people who experience homelessness who don’t feel safe at the adult shelters,” Rosenkrantz said. “[However], we were getting feedback that the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter was a safe place [for young people], even though it was an adult shelter, because it was run by students.”

Armed with that knowledge, Rosenkrantz and Greenberg spent three years talking to various organizations and people in order to move forward with the project. They formed an advisory board, built a team and found space for the shelter. They ultimately settled into the basement of the First Parish Church after conversations with the Rev. Fred Small and the church’s congregation.

Part of the connection came from a shared commitment to progressive values and human dignity, according to Susan Shepherd, chairwoman of the church’s governing board.

“We have a commitment of the inherent worth and dignity of all people,” Shepherd said. “In Harvard Square, there are a lot of people who are homeless. It’s really important to show a commitment and to be committed in helping out in any small way you can.”

Rosenkrantz and Greenberg are on board with that sentiment. One of their goals, Rosenkrantz said, is to create a trauma-informed space that is “gender inclusive and provides comfort and safety to all its residents.”

To create the space, Y2Y’s team partnered with several organizations. One of them, Youth on Fire – a group run by the AIDS Action Committee providing medical care, daytime services and other services to homeless youth – will operate out of the new shelter during the day in furtherance of Y2Y’s goal of helping homeless youth find paths out of homelessness.

“The issues of safe shelter, and youth-specific spaces especially, have been central to the work that Youth on Fire has done since its opening,” Mandy Lussier, site program manager for Youth on Fire, said in an email to The News. “Many members joined the focus groups and provided critical information that contributed to the mission of the Y2Y project.”

The Y2Y team is still in the process of raising the roughly \$1.25 million necessary to complete the shelter. Organizations including the Smith Family Association and Harvard Business Association, as well as individuals in Boston and Cambridge who want to help the homeless, have provided funds for the shelter.

“We’re very excited,” Shepherd said. “It’s just been great to have this group of young people to work with and to give us the opportunity to do something we wouldn’t have done otherwise.”

Photo by Scotty Schenck

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