



## youthSpark's 2019 Grant Impact Report

Our Center is unparalleled in its support and advocacy for at-risk, trauma affected youth and families. Located within the Fulton County Juvenile Court and the cornerstone of our work, the *Youth Services Center* gives us the ability to directly connect at-risk children who are referred by the court system or other partners with the legal and/or critical services they need to begin their path toward healing and becoming productive, successful, and thriving adults. The Center is available to girls, boys, and LGBTQ youth and families in need of various interventions and provides them with an opportunity to stay connected with a case manager and receive life-changing services—whether that is crisis intervention, court and legal advocacy, in-house weekly support groups, educational activities, or other community-based services. The Center also offers an early intervention model that increases youth's wellbeing and health, reduces vulnerabilities, and helps them build relationships with positive adult role models. Our goal is to ensure no child experiences further trauma, abuse, or exploitation.

Every child that we serve through our *Youth Services Center* comes to us at different points in the year, depending on the time of referral. They also require varying levels of support. For example, we might welcome a child into our Center who simply requires a few school supplies and a referral for self-sustaining services offered by one of the many partners we collaborate with every day. Most youth require more extensive interventions.

Because the youth that we serve in our *Youth Services Center* come from families requiring government assistance to meet their daily needs, it is important to address economic stability as well. This happens, for example, through employment coaching, entrepreneurship, and other skills-based opportunities. Case managers and trained volunteers assist with job searches, help youth complete resumes and applications, and conduct mock interviews with young people to prepare them for their futures. Because so many have so little, the Center maintains a resource closet, the Dream Closet, to assist youth with dressing for success and personal items when needed.

Education advocacy is also provided to ensure that all youth remain in school or enrolled in a GED or alternative education program. Case managers attend student support team meetings, link youth with tutors, and assist families with identifying needed resources.

Uniforms, school supplies, and MARTA cards are also accessible through the Center to ensure that youth remain in school. Case managers also provide ongoing support for parents in need of economic resources by linking them with verified community-based referrals and advocacy services to prevent and manage family crises that place their child at increased risks.

With the support of our wonderful funders, we were able to help our youth with four key service components: 1) screening for current/unresolved prior exposure to abuse and exploitation; 2) case-managing advocates who provide personal advocacy, crisis intervention, and group therapy; 3) service referrals to our partners to address issues like housing or medical care; and, 4) emergency assistance for youth and families who cannot afford to access services.



We are fortunate that the majority of our program staff salaries is covered primarily by a Criminal Justice Coordinating Council VOCA grant, as well as a grant from Fulton County (Community Service Program). This means that funding from the MAXIMUS Foundation was able to go directly to serving clients through our other program/services expense categories of 1) client assistance, 2) materials and activities, 3) transportation for clients, 4) meals and snacks for clients, and 5) training. When we look at the individual service units we provided for youth with open cases (not including those youth for whom we only provided referral for) in our Center (which can include multiple serve units per youth), we provided:

- 484 units of court advocacy,
- 173 units of criminal justice support/advocacy/accompaniment,
- 1,652 units of individual support and counseling,
- 565 units of group therapy,
- 510 units of transportation assistance,
- 62 units of non-traditional therapeutic interventions,
- 121 acts of crisis intervention, and
- 114 referrals to other service providers.

In addition to our three specialized program tracks (Voices for girls, Expressions for LGBTQ+ youth, and Connections for boys), our *Youth Services Center* continued to offer additional services in 2019, including opportunities for youth to inquire about employment opportunities, creating vision boards, or participating in one-time courses on social media safety. Our team also offered technical assistance to other youth-serving organizations and community groups who work with at-risk youth, including the Division of Family and Children's Services, Communities in Schools, and Elks Aidmore Therapeutic Foster Care Home, in need of resources or court advocacy.

## 1. Overview of grant financials.

*Youth Services Center* Program Expenses (non-salary)--January through December 2019

● Client Assistance	\$6,190
● Materials and Activities	\$49,432
● Driver Transport	\$8,516
● Marta Cards	\$2,310
● Meals & Snacks	\$10,289
● Training Costs	\$3,818
● Deterrence Technologies	\$119
● Total Program Expenses	\$80,674

## Outputs:

### 2. Who we serve



In the calendar year 2019, we had 144 referrals. These youth walked through our doors to access resources, support, and trust. Their ages were between 12 to 18 years old, and all of the youth that we served live in Fulton County, Georgia. The gender breakdown of our youth included 63 girls and 81

boys, and the racial breakdown included 125 African-American youth; 12 Hispanic youth; one white youth, two multi-racial youth, and four youth whose race was not specified. Over 60% of our clients live in what the Fulton County Board of Commissioners has deemed as high-risk zip codes (30310, 30312, 30314, 30315, 30318, 30331, and 30344) that are substantially more underserved and high need than the counties of Fulton and DeKalb at large. For these zip codes, the average poverty rate is almost 32%, and a stunning 47% of residents under the age of 18 live in poverty. These areas are also identified as high-risk for violent crime, hunger, and dropping out of school. In addition, we also had 69 new cases opened and served 145 cases. Grants funding provided services to these youth over the course of one year.

## Outcomes:

### 3. Our challenges

Over the past year we recognized a decline in new referrals for LGBTQ+ youth made and also a lack of consistent participation with previously referred youth. We identified three root causes: 1) the Court lacks official policies and procedures for identifying youth who identify as LGBTQ+; 2) Court personnel has reported feeling uncomfortable asking SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression) questions or lacks the understanding that collecting SOGIE data is critically important; and, 3) the parents of referred youth need education and support allowing them to look beyond personal biases to ensure their children get the services they need.

To respond to these challenges, we have: 1) begun working with Court Administration to help develop a plan to begin identifying and collecting data in their current data

management system when initially entering the client data in 2020; 2) we have applied for “*The Whole Youth Project: Improving Outcomes for LGBQ/GNCT Youth JDAI Technical Assistance*.” The purpose of this project is designed to help agencies collect data on every young person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression and help departments more effectively affirm young people’s many identities. This conference takes place in February 2020 and representatives from both youthSpark and Fulton County Juvenile Court will be certified as official trainers to teach personnel best practices for collecting data; and, 3) we have identified that there are no public resources or support groups for parents who express discomfort with acceptance, especially when it challenges their own moral or religious beliefs. To that end, we will work in 2020 to explore working with community partners who have the expertise to develop a group specific to parents, including the addition of “peer leaders” which are parents who are willing to share their own experiences for support. Additionally, we do not believe that all parents lack the ability to accept their child, rather they lack resources, education, and guidance to navigate these challenges.

We also had several new issues come up in our groups. For example, discussions with the youth in both the Voices and Expressions groups revealed a high incidence of dating violence amongst group



participants which led to the following action by the Case Manager and Clinician to address the issue:

- We planned group sessions and activities targeted at raising awareness about the impact of dating violence and to teach them ways to avoid perpetrating these behaviors or becoming a victim.
- We collaborated with Partnership Against Domestic Violence to schedule the facilitation of a workshop for each group, including Connections, to address this issue.

In-home conflict, familial discord and poor parental boundaries are also prevalent in the youth and families that we serve. These factors have oftentimes contributed to low program attendance hampering our ability to work with the youth and family. Case managers and our Clinician addressed this issue by:

- We adopted strategies to enlist parents as equal partners (holding parent meetings, providing psychoeducation) in the treatment of the youth's issues, thereby increasing parental engagement.
- We encouraged and expected greater accountability from parents/caregivers through weekly discussions/conferences, as it relates to youth program attendance and the management of problematic behaviors (i.e., school attendance, adhering to established household rules/boundaries, etc.).
- Our youth and their caregivers received referrals and were encouraged to attend individual and family therapy to address familial issues.
- We made linkages to community resources such as University for Parents to access support for our parents and families.

#### **4. Our successes**

Our impact goal is for each client to stay in school, graduate, and move on to higher education and/or gainful employment. Our goals included:

- 90% of clients will complete the intake/evaluation process (outcome: 95%)
- 75% of clients will maintain weekly group attendance (outcome: 75%)
- 75% of clients will decrease runaway incidents or make connection with a trusted adult before attempting to runaway (outcome: 80%)
- 75% of clients will decrease truancy rates/increase their school attendance/engagement (outcome: 75%)
- 75% of clients will comply with probation and court mandates (outcome: 80%)

We also wanted to ensure that:

- 75% of clients attend program activities and sessions (outcome: 80%)
- 90% of clients complete an individual action plan (outcome: 95%)
- 75% of clients are promoted to the next highest-grade level (outcome: This outcome is still in progress and will be finalized at the end of the school year)
- 75% of clients engage in determining and launching the class project (outcome: 75% which included sending holiday cards to the Berean Senior Home at Thanksgiving and Christmas)

We can also report numerous successes in our three program tracks:



## VOICES

During the calendar year 2019, the Voices program track enrolled 51 young women, out of these, 21 were regular participants in group programming that utilized skill-building, psychoeducational approaches.

The Voices group is exploring the logistics associated with facilitating a separate group for young women who may have experienced risk-taking behaviors, such as sharing inappropriate images online or other similar risk-taking behaviors. Some of the identified challenges are staffing and scheduling of the group. As in the case of the Connections group, two evidence-based curricula have been selected for the Voices group. Love 146 curriculum has been selected to address the young women who are victims of sexual exploitation. The Voices curriculum has been selected for the second group to address the issues of young women mentioned earlier; who present with risk-taking behaviors, but are not appropriate to participate in the first/original Voices group.

During this reporting period, the Voices participants completed the Healthy Relationships curriculum. The curricula administered during weekly group sessions, 1800RUNAWAY, Love Is Not Abuse, Internet Safety, and My Life My Choice, are geared towards girls who have been victims of sexual exploitation, unhealthy relationships, and other risky sexual behaviors. Our girls received education and skills in sexual safety, health and wellness, healthy relationships, conflict resolution, and self-esteem. They have reported that they are handling conflict more effectively, utilizing conflict resolution tools that they have learned in group. Within the Voices group we have also experienced an increase in pregnant and parenting teen members. As the rate of teen pregnancy continues to fall

nationally, we know that the rate of pregnancy amongst African-American and Latino youth continues to be disproportionately high. The gold standard to address this crisis is education and access to preventive care. So, in addition to scheduling group participants touring Grady Teen Health Clinic or case managers are more intentional in addressing sexual-risk taking behaviors in group, providing education and linkages to comprehensive sexual healthcare.

Additionally, we have initiated a partnership with Grady's Women's Center to ensure these youth have access to specifically needed wraparound services, such as their Centering Pregnancy, Baby Friendly, and Talk With Me Baby Program. Centering Pregnancy is a special prenatal program that is offered at only a handful of specially accredited Georgia hospitals--and only at Grady in Atlanta. The program is designed to create support groups of women whose babies are due at a similar time. In addition to getting regular prenatal visits and examinations, program participants routinely meet in groups to learn to care for their own health and that of their babies. Baby Friendly encourages breastfeeding, which has been shown to keep babies healthier. Grady is one of only two Atlanta hospitals certified to offer the program. The Talk With Me Baby program encourages mothers and other caregivers to spend time talking to newborns. Research shows that the brains of infants who are talked to regularly tend to develop faster than those who are not. Early brain development means that children communicate when they are younger and perform better in school. Grady also offers traditional obstetric care, which includes prenatal care and fetal assessments, such as ultrasounds.



## CONNECTIONS

The Connections program track conducts a six-week conflict-resolution, anger management group aimed towards young men who may present with a history of maladaptive expressions of anger, conflictual relationships, family disruption, elopement behaviors, and grooming or recruitment into gangs or trafficking (victims or exploiters). The Connections program track enrolled 53 young boys, out of these, 25 were regular participants in group programming that utilized skill-building, psychoeducational approaches. The Connections participants attend a weekly support group, where they learn skills that will help them to better navigate and cope with life's challenges. The course focuses on anger management techniques (Choice-Based Anger), goal-setting (SMART Goals), Understanding the Criminal Justice System, and Teen Suicide Prevention. It is also our intention to see an end to sexual exploitation and human trafficking of our youth (and adults). To that end, we realize the importance of taking a preventive stance in this fight.

Our anger management group with our Connections participants helped to shine the light on car theft and how youth are being used to drive these crimes. They are preyed on by adults who know that they will receive lighter sentences if apprehended; targeting disadvantaged youth who are attracted by the allure of fast money. Our Connections Case Manager led the charge to increase awareness to deter this burgeoning criminal enterprise, which resulted in us 1) collaborating with Fulton County Juvenile Court resulting in a town hall event where youth were invited to a panel discussion and call to action to deter involvement in this dangerous, criminal behavior; and 2) fostering discussions with Connections participants that connects the dots between aggressive/conflictual behaviors and larger social indicators that impact the lives of youth.

Some of our boys who participated in the Truly Living Well Urban Growers program had an opportunity in October to set up a "pop up" shop in the atrium here at Fulton County Juvenile Court and received 100% of proceeds from their organic bug spray sales.

In November, youthSpark teamed up with Fulton County Juvenile Court to host our very first Teen Town Hall: "Grand Theft Auto: Slider Crimes Are Not a Game" at the Court. This educational event focused on the dangers, consequences and common misconceptions surrounding slider crimes and their impact on the community. This event brought out almost 50 youth and parents to discuss the dangers, consequences, and common misconceptions surrounding recruitment for car thefts, slider crimes, and their impact on the community. The engaging and impactful panel discussion featured a cross-section of community stakeholders including: Mr. Kenneth Mitchell, Assistant District Attorney, Mr. Sho Watson, Attorney/Judge Pro Temp, Officer Charles Callahan, Fulton Co. Schools Police Department, Officer Ashlei Ellis, Atlanta Public Schools Police Department, Mr. Vincent Phillips, Attorney, Arrington & Phillips, and Ms. Takesia Shields, Executive Director, Mother's Against Gang Violence.

## EXPRESSIONS

Our Expressions program track was created to serve LGBTQ+ youth focusing on three primary goals: 1) to gain a better understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation; 2) to decrease runaway attempts, in-home conflicts, bullying, and abuse/neglect; and, 3) to provide increased awareness, support and resources for LGBTQ+ youth and their family members as they navigate social and legal

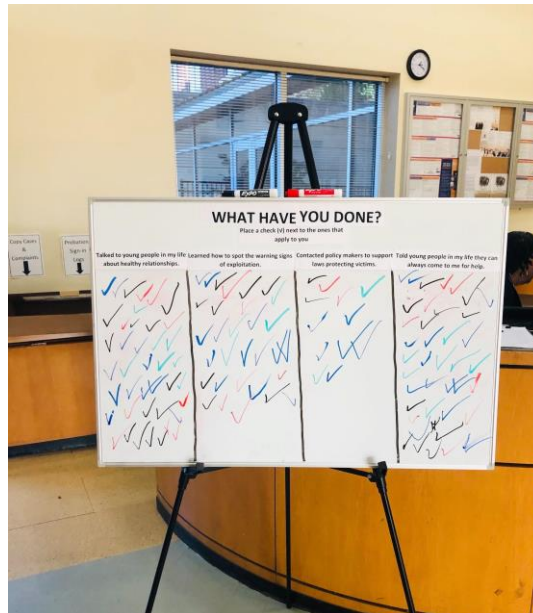




systems. Expressions seeks to increase resilience, encourage positive behavior and healthy coping strategies for LGBTQ+ youth of color and their families by providing an affirming and supportive environment. Any court-involved youth who (a) identifies as LGBTQ+, (b) is between the ages of 13-17 and (c) is experiencing in-home conflict and community/educational bullying, family rejection or discrimination on the basis of SOGIE is eligible to participate in Expressions. The ideal cohort size is six to nine participants.

### 5. How we include the voice of the community you serve in your decision-making

When conducting trainings and community awareness events, we ask attendees to participate in our community engagement boards. By making a checkmark next to the activities they have done themselves, it allows us to gain insight into areas where more education is needed, and also allows us to better gauge community members who understand and participate in the legislative process. Our community engagement board can be tailored to each specific audience as well.



### Looking Forward:

### 6. Preparing for the Future

We are always working to improve the way in which we support the youth we serve. We will continue our efforts through the *Youth Services Center* and estimate we will serve 180+ youth in 2020. In addition, some of our key objectives to continue to grow, improve, and move forward include:

- Finalize our refinement and updates on our curriculum for all three program tracks (Voices, Connections, and Expressions). We received funding 2019-2020 to strengthen and enhance the components of our program tracks
- Continue to gather baseline data to create new measures to track trauma, stabilization, etc. with our youth, expanding our needs assessments and tracking youth outcomes



- Continue to improve the referral process with Fulton County Juvenile Court, our primary partner
- Continue to expand the functionality of our data management system, Civicore.
- Provide additional staff training and certification opportunities to help those youth experiencing a mental health crisis
- Continue to seek out community service partners to help us extend our reach by offering workshops, such as our Internet safety course, to youth who are not involved with the juvenile justice system
- Create a plan to evaluate and measure our impact in partnership with Emory University Rollins School of Public Policy.
- Develop relationships with more corporate partners to offer youth real-life experiences to further propel them into success and explore career opportunities throughout the healing process. This also allows the corporate community to proactively support agencies with missions to address human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation even if it is not exactly their focus of community outreach.

#### **7. Our organization's two most significant financial challenges**

One of the most significant financial challenges we face is an issue we mentioned in our previous report which has to do with funding. It can often be difficult to secure funding for prevention/early intervention work. A lot of funding comes after the fact, when someone has already been victimized--whatever that might be. It is very difficult to measure that something has NOT taken place and to get funding for this. How do you prove your program is effective in someone NOT being victimized? That someone was NOT abused or trafficked? Funds for prevention work are very limited, but that is exactly the work we are doing at youthSpark. We are working to make sure no youth who walks through our door experiences further exploitation, abuse or trauma. To address this issue is a long process that requires us to work in the community talking about our efforts to prevent abuse and telling our story about the importance of the community--and funders--getting in front of the devastating issue of abuse by working to prevent it in the first place.

Another financial challenge we face is obtaining funds for marketing to help us elevate our brand and increase our visibility in the community. This is not an uncommon challenge in the non-profit community. We have a unique voice in the trafficking arena that goes beyond the traditional narrative of victimization, looking at the vulnerabilities that reflect the realities of the youth we serve and doing what we need to provide new programming and educating the community at large. Most of our referrals are coming from the Fulton County Juvenile Court, but we can serve anyone in the community. To this, we must find ways to build our brand and get the word out about what we do will have a long-term impact on this issue. Marketing dollars help make this work possible, and yet it can often be difficult to make the case to potential funders about the importance of these operational dollars.

#### **Stories of Impact:**

#### **8. Meet Drew...**

In the case of our youth, "Drew" is currently being raised by his grandparents because he was removed from his biological mother's home at the age of eight after being physically abused by his step-father. Drew lives within the zip code, 30349, which is considered a low/very low Child Well-Being Community.





With limited understanding of his removal from his biological mother's home and limited resources in place to assist Drew's grandparents, he began to display verbal aggression and property destruction at his grandparents' home and these behaviors resulted in him being detained and placed on probation. Drew was referred to youthSpark because of

family in-home conflict due to his grandparents lack of understanding of his sexual orientation. Since being referred to Expressions, his grandparents received gender-specific counseling and psychoeducation which has improved their relationship with Drew which ultimately resulted in his compliance in the home.

Although his grandparents still struggle with using supportive ally language, they are open to continue to learn about the LGBTQ community and how they can best support Drew. Drew's behaviors have also improved in that he is demonstrating respectful behavior and language in the home. He has also enrolled in individual counseling, a GED program to continue his education, and is consistently participating in Expressions. Drew aspires to be a nurse and is motivated to complete his GED program. He recently passed the Social Studies and Science portions of the GED practice exam. If Drew and his family continue to consistently participate in rendered services, they will experience positive family cohesion. His grandparents will also become more supportive and better allies for Drew.