

When the Day Ends, We are All Entitled to a Place to Call Home

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In 2013, it came to light that a single 12 year old boy, who was also a student in the Frederick County Public School System (FCPS), was in urgent need of a pair of shoes. He had one pair of flip flops at the time that were broken, and with Winter quickly approaching, it was obvious he could not continue to wear those shoes for much longer. Within two days, the Frederick community provided much more than just a pair of shoes for this student. However, in doing this, an even broader problem was uncovered within the local community- this student was only one out of over 600 students in the FCPS system living in homeless circumstances.

When school lets out for the day, students usually go back home to do homework, eat dinner with their families, or maybe even just get comfortable in their own bed to catch up on sleep. Yet, this is not every child's story. There are hundreds of students in FCPS who go to school in the morning, not knowing where they are going once school is dismissed later in the day. While most students are at home with their family having dinner or game nights, there is a whole other population of students who do not even know where their next meal is coming from.

What really began as a need for one pair of shoes, developed into a larger understanding of just how big this problem is, even in Frederick County alone. This then led to the creation of SHIP (Student Homelessness Initiative Partnership) in Frederick- a non-profit organization who, working to the best of their ability, assists homeless youth in Frederick County each day.

“We saw an opportunity to take a step forward and organize to help our school system to provide for what was clearly a need that, to this day, themselves do not have the capacity to manage” says Ed Hinde, Executive Director of SHIP, “they [homeless youth] are literally floating. They have no home. They bounce around as best they can.”

This is an increasing issue in Frederick County specifically as Hinde says “when we [SHIP] first started about five years ago there were just over six hundred children in the school system that were homeless,” adding that “at the trend rate we’re going at right now, we’ll close the school year at very close to nine hundred [homeless youth in FCPS].”

Many people are shocked to hear that this is happening in their own community, however, the latest ALICE data explains it all. The data released in 2019 reports that the cost of living for families in Frederick County has risen by 20% from 2010-2016. Hinde elaborates on this as “this perfectly aligns with what the findings in the ALICE Report tells us- there is a growing disparity between families and individuals who are just not able to keep up with the rising cost of living [in Frederick].”

Essentially, these youth become victims of something that they cannot control, and end up suffering the consequences of it. It is a destructive cycle that Frederick County has fallen into. However, it can be stopped.

Through initial funding by United Way of Frederick County (UWFC) and the Unity Campaign, SHIP continues to alleviate the youth homeless crisis in Frederick County and bring an awareness to the fact that there is a problem, and the entire community should be present to help fix it.

SHIP of Frederick County is currently a Community Impact Partner with United Way of Frederick County. SHIP will receive \$30,000 each year for the next three years to help with funding for their New Horizons program funded through donations made to United Way's Community Impact Program.

The funds provided by United Way through their Community Impact Partner Grant and Unity Campaign are put directly towards SHIP's New Horizons Program and "helps provide the organizational costs for salaries as well as out of pocket services that the organization incurs in supporting these kids [in New Horizons]".

The New Horizons program is designed specifically for homeless youth in Frederick County to "increase the likelihood of an on-time graduation and to alleviate future homelessness." Each student who enrolls in the program is referred by their high school guidance counselor and is given a plan that involves stable housing, medical assistance, financial support and largely, the educational support they need in order to graduate on time with their peers.

More than anything, the immense support that United Way has provided SHIP throughout their journey as a new non-profit organization has directly helped them to continue to advocate for homeless youth in the Frederick County Public School System.

"I cannot say enough about the level of support we receive from United Way" says Hinde, "it is the recognition by United Way and its affiliated partners of the fact that we have homeless youth in Frederick County... that is important to the community."

Furthermore, Hinde says that additionally, "if we did not have that [grant money], then we would not be able to impact the number of kids that we have in the program..."

To its grantees, United Way of Frederick County strives to provide tremendous support in the forms of financial assistance, quarterly check-ins, and simply supporting the mission. Partnering with UWFC, SHIP is able to continue to fulfill its mission to inspire successful students in Frederick County each day.

"At the end of the day, it really is about investing in these children because they all hold promise... and they are individuals who are entitled to be maturing, responsible and serving to their community". UWFC staff and donors could not agree with Hinde more and are proud to support SHIP's vision of decreased student homelessness and increased graduation rates for years to come.

When the day ends, no student should be left unsure of where they are sleeping that night, when they might eat next, or even if they get to graduate with the rest of their class. When the day ends, we all are entitled to a safe place to eat dinner, have game nights, and call home.