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‘Our guests had no other options’

Y2Y Harvard Square continues to shelter young homeless adults during the coronavirus pandemic

As of early April, despite a mandated exodus of Harvard students, Y2Y Harvard Square remained open and serving a full complement of guests each night.

The student-run overnight shelter for young adults experiencing homelessness is a collaboration of [Y2Y Network](#), the [Phillips Brooks House Association](#), and the [First Parish in Cambridge](#), where the shelter is housed.

Here is a conversation about the challenges of serving during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Y2Y Network Executive Director Cameron Van Fossen, Phillips Brooks House Association Class of 1955 Executive Director Maria Dominguez Gray, and the Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer, lead minister at the church.

Q. What has life been like for the Y2Y Harvard Square shelter the past couple of weeks?

Cameron: It’s definitely been a whirlwind. The first big catalyst, other than COVID-19 itself, was Harvard closing its doors and sending students home. Since our model is student led, that was essentially our whole workforce.

Maria: *Whirlwind* is a good word. Y2Y is one of 70 programs Phillips Brooks House Association that students lead. Students are engaged in direct service efforts not only for people experiencing homeless, but for families and children, adult learners and the elderly. It’s been tough to take care of both our students and our constituents, who are the most vulnerable.

Adam: Not that the crisis is in any way pleasant or good, but I’ve approached this from the standpoint of, what’s the spiritual reflection in this crisis? What’s the theological grounding, if you will? I have to look at this as *revelatory*. This crisis is revealing the strengths and the weaknesses of situations, systems and relationships.

On the strength side, I think it’s been exciting to hear the leadership of Y2Y wrestle with the duality of, first, we have a literal global pandemic happening. And second, within that, we have a vulnerable population that needs protection.

Some homeless shelters have presumably closed their doors. How did you decide to stay open during this crisis?

Cameron: Our immediate thought was, we can’t let our youth end up on the street in a global pandemic. We had a really visceral knowledge that our guests didn’t have other options and haven’t had safe



experiences and adult shelters. We also know that a lot of our service partners closed for reasons outside their control, and everyone in our service community has truly done everything within their power to show up for those experiencing homelessness during this time.

What needed to change in order for Y2Y to remain open?

Cameron: Most importantly, staying open required the support of a lot of different people like Phillips Brooks House Association, First Parish in Cambridge, a medical advisory team of folks from Boston Healthcare for the Homeless and Boston University School of Medicine, Cambridge Public Health, our local elected officials, Harvard and PBHA staff and alumni, among many. Particularly, the City of Cambridge stepped in to fund us to be able to stay open.

As students started leaving campus, we talked to our student leaders right away about their needs were and whether some folks wished to stay and help staff the shelter. We also activated alumni so that they could stay and work with us. I spoke with our guests about whether they had other options for where they could be. We started our emergency funds, we started activating donors, and we contacted the cities of Cambridge and Boston, the health departments, and the state.

With so many students sent home, how can the shelter operate?

Maria: The folks who are working in the shelter are either Harvard students or alumni who live locally or they're from other colleges and are local. So they live here at home or found housing through the alumni network or peers who supported them.

Since our staff capacity is reduced, we've supplemented that capacity with professional staff from Arbor, a social services staffing agency that works with many well-known organizations throughout the nonprofit sector. Professional staff from Y2Y and PBHA have also worked shifts to ensure the shelter can stay open with folks who know our young people and are committed to our values and model.

Was there any pressure to close during the pandemic?

Maria: On March 10th or whatever that day was, I wasn't sure we would be able to remain open. We made hour-by-hour decisions and relied on the strength of our partners to support us with information and help us figure out what was possible.

I think some other shelters closed because they had very real constraints that prevented them from being able to stay open. And I don't want to act like we did know what to do, because I still don't know how much longer we can stay open.

Adam: The main reason the church [where the shelter is located] has been supportive of remaining open comes down to the model: It's student-led. The students are well trained; they understand what they're doing; they understand the population; they have a real connection to the work. And so it was absolutely crucial that the model stay true. It has, and it's been very inspiring.

Cameron: I think it's important to acknowledge, too, that many other shelters were able to stay open and are working really hard to keep serving this community! And that as the Y2Y community, we're evaluating every single week whether it's viable and whether we have the criteria in place to continue to stay open. So far, so good.



What are you doing differently to mitigate COVID-19 risk?

Cameron: We've implemented protocols to keep folks from contracting and spreading the disease in the shelter space. Those include screening staff and guests for temperature and respiratory symptoms, and implementing hand-washing and social distancing within the space. The space is receiving professional, deep cleaning every single day, and so forth.

Maria: It's a blessing that the beds are like closed pods. They enable us to make sure that people are relatively safe within their pods, and the openings are already facing outwards. It's not a model in which people are sleeping next to each other on cots. We're also hosting a less transient population than usual. It's more of a consistent group of people who are building community together during this difficult time.

What has the shelter culture been like?

Maria: Guests have taken incredible responsibility for one another. They're aware of what's at stake. And they've just shown tremendous leadership and common purpose.

Cameron: Very much so. I was in the shelter on Saturday overnight, and a guest who I'll call Terrell, who's 19 and has nowhere else to go, came up to me and said, "I don't trust a lot of people, but I trust the Y2Y staff, and I'm glad that y'all are open." It was really reaffirming. When you're in the space, there's this very visceral sense of the importance of the work.

Adam: There's been such a shift over the five years in my congregation's perception of Y2Y and what is possible, particularly with the clients who are served. Congregants don't see a young person who is on the street as a nuisance or an embarrassment, but rather as a neighbor and, well, part of the family. Congregants are actively looking for ways to support, to invite guests. Although we're separated by a floor, we're not separated. We are one entity.

What's the biggest challenge that you've needed to overcome?

Maria: Probably deciding the appropriate level of involvement for student leaders. We want contingencies in place to ensure both guests and students are safe. I think we came up with really good solutions around those things, but especially early on, we didn't know a lot of the answers to the many what-if scenarios we kept coming up with.



What do you think the community should know about Y2Y during this precarious time?

Maria: I think the most important takeaway is just how grateful we are to PBHA, the church, the city of Cambridge, the health departments, students, alumni, our network staff as well as our young people in the space. Also to our donors who have stepped up and made it possible for us to stay open. I feel like everybody is working so hard to make sure that this extremely vulnerable population, already facing all of these systemic barriers to physical health and holistic well-being, is safe.

Cameron: If you ever wondered what you would do in a pivotal moment in history – either creating justice in the world or not stepping up – now is the time we all find out. Nothing in my life has moved me as much as seeing everyone has step up to care for the most vulnerable of our neighbors. And it’s been inspiring to be a part of the work. I’m so grateful to everyone.

Adam: Coming out of this, there’s an opportunity for people who are looking at Y2Y from the outside to really see youth homelessness through a completely different lens, to recognize what vulnerability has meant in this kind of a situation.

I’m hoping that people will recognize that it’s not just a matter of, yes, [giving money](#) – absolutely giving money – but also, let’s change some legislation. Let’s actually create more opportunities for young people to not be on the streets. Whether that is interventions that need to happen with families, or creating models like this to work.

And, yes, we all will be changed by this.

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