

A day inside Dallas' only drop-in center for homeless youths

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There are over 4,000 homeless students in Dallas. This former elementary school building provides a safe space for about 150 of them.

By [Sonia A. Rao](#)



After8toEducate intern Raegan Freeman and Noel Zabel, 21, cook turkey burgers during a cooking class at the Fannie C. Harris Youth Center on a recent day. Zabel uses After8 services almost daily after living in a transitional housing shelter for homeless youth next door to the center. (Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

Noel Zabel, 21, sat on a worn blue leather seat on a DART bus, scrolling through Instagram reels on his phone. His 6-foot-1 frame was sandwiched between two rows as he passed through downtown, Deep Ellum and Fair Park.

He was on his way to the Fannie C. Harris Youth Center, the only drop-in center for homeless youths in Dallas.

“Haskell at Gurney,” the operator said.

Zabel stepped off the bus and began his four-minute walk to the center. It would be 105 degrees in a few hours, but in the morning light, it was not yet 90.

When he arrived at the brown-brick building, it was not open yet. He wanted to arrive early to beat the overwhelming summer heat.

Summer intern Ariana Green pulled up to the curb in a white car soon after him just before 9 a.m.

“What’s up, Noel?” she greeted him.

“How you doing?” he shot back.

Zabel visits the drop-in center almost every day.

Youths ages 14 to 21 come to eat meals, shower, borrow computers, do laundry, speak to counselors, get a change of clothes, store their things in lockers or just hang out. Next door, a Dallas ISD partnership allows enrolled students 18 and under to sleep at a 35-bed emergency and transitional living shelter.

The drop-in center run by nonprofit After8ToEducate is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. year-round as a safe space for about 150 homeless youth — those 14 to 21 years old — in Dallas. Across the city, thousands of younger students are also struggling with homelessness.

Teens get access to a variety of resources and sessions on sexual health, financial literacy, education and even grief therapy. Some days, there’s a cooking class where they learn about nutrition as they make meals together.

Zabel discovered the center while living in the transitional living shelter next door, which was partnered with the nonprofit Promise House at the time. He spent a few months away, but now he’s back, hoping to find a job and get his life together.

“I don’t have to worry about anything while I’m here,” he said.

Preventing a cycle of chronic homelessness

As the summer day went on, more youths started to trickle in.

A young boy came quietly, sat by himself on a gray chair in the common area and put on a pair of headphones. Two friends crouched over a computer together, laughing at videos.

Another teen arrived dripping with sweat. He asked to use one of three single-stall bathrooms to take a shower.

About 40 youths visit the center on an average day, executive director Ara Grimaldo Saintus said.

That includes unsheltered youths and kids from the community who stop by to use the center's resources. Visitors increase during the summer months, when students are on break and want to escape the heat, Saintus said.

It is difficult to get an accurate count of how many homeless students are actually in Dallas, DISD officials said, though they added that last school year's estimate of 4,335 students is likely low.

Federal law defines homeless youths as those 21 and under who lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."

That can mean students sleeping on friends' couches, in abandoned apartments or in the streets, Saintus said. Some even ride on DART all night. She's seen so many ways kids are homeless and works to find places for them to stay at night when possible.

The goal is to expand the center to a 24-hour operation, Saintus said.

"No one really thinks about youth homelessness," Saintus said. "When you think about the homeless population, you think about an adult. Never do you fathom there's an 18-year-old — still considered a youth — sleeping on the streets."

When community advocate Mayra Fierro was 17, she came out to her parents as lesbian. They kicked her out. She wandered the streets in the dark, not knowing where to go.

She ended up spending that first night 16 years ago at a 24/7 restaurant.

It would have meant everything to her to have a space like the drop-in center to turn to instead, Fierro said.

"I wouldn't have had to go inside Williams Chicken, but you know what? Bless the chicken," she quipped.

Nationwide, 28% of LGBTQ youths report homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives, according to The Trevor Project, a suicide prevention organization for LGBTQ youths.

Homeless teens are more likely to be involved in the prison system, to struggle with addiction and mental health and to be at risk for human trafficking, Saintus said. So the goal of programming at the center is to use education to reduce chronic homelessness, she added.

“We can kind of prevent that [cycle] now,” she said.

A safe space

Angel Rowell, 19, is another regular visitor. On a recent day, she arrived at the center to get hygiene products and fresh fruit. Then she looked for part-time employee Rebecah Silva.

When Rowell started dropping by the center in late February, she was living in abandoned apartment buildings with friends. Silva noticed that the teen always wore her hair in two buns.

One slow day, Silva asked to braid her hair. The teen opened up as she did so.

Soon, with encouragement from After8ToEducate staff, Rowell reached out to extended family and started living with an uncle. She now plans to attend a DISD high school so she can graduate and go to college.

On that late July afternoon, the teen had simply come in to see if Silva could braid purple extensions into her hair.

She dug through clear buckets on a shelf by the window, pulling out a few hair accessories shaped like flowers.

“Becah, will you put these clips in my hair?” she yelled across the center. “They’re so cute.”

She brought the clips and hair products to a table, where a friend began sectioning her hair and weaving in the purple strands while Silva finished a meeting.

Rowell teased the other teens at the table, laughed at their jokes and shared videos. Eventually, she closed her eyes.

Getting her hair done made her feel safe, cared for.