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Local youths gain insight on homelessness

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Luckily for the 40 students who spent five hours in cardboard boxes on Nov. 22, the temperature dropped only into low 30s.

It could have been worse, and they could have been living on the streets, instead of experiencing life outside just until 11 p.m.

"They could warm up if they needed to. It's not like they were out there all the time," said Christine Dildine, board member with the House of Neighborly Service.

The students - from Mountain View and Thompson Valley high schools and the Youth Advisory Commission - raised pledges for each hour they spent in cardboard boxes outside of the HNS Life Center, 1511 E. 11th St., during National Homeless Awareness Month in November. They learned what being homeless could be like taking part in the inaugural Undercover Heroes (Students) Helping Homeless Families event.

One-fourth of the pledges went toward the student homeless fund at Thompson School District, which has more than 600 homeless students attending its schools, and the rest to the Angel House. The Angel House, located in the Life Center, provides a day shelter on site and collaborates with 14 local churches for a rotating overnight shelter and evening meal for homeless families one week at a time.

"We wanted to hold the event to raise awareness, especially with the youth in the community, about the issue of homelessness," said Rebecca Brace, program manager for the Angel House. "With families, it's pretty hidden. The community doesn't visibly see homeless families as they see homeless individuals that go to the 137 (Homeless Connection)."

The students brought their own cardboard boxes to spend time in them in the parking lot to experience the conditions homeless youth and adults face when living on the streets. They tried to keep warm, talked among themselves, listened to speakers and toured the Life Center.

The speakers included a homeless family who, with the help of the Angel House, moved from living in a car to transitional housing. A single woman spoke about leaving a domestic violence situation and getting help through the 137 Connection, a day shelter and emergency night shelter for homeless individuals.

"It's frightening out there if you're alone," Dildine said. "When she was homeless, she didn't look homeless. She was clean, living in a tent with her dog. ... She showered at the 137."

The students learned that homelessness can impact anyone and can be caused by a variety of factors, such as a loss of a job, health problems, domestic violence, mental health issues or mismanagement of financial resources. They saw that homeless individuals and families struggle to find shelter, stay warm, deal with the weather, get their next meal and feel safe.

They took a tour of the Angel House day center, the Center for Adult Learning and the food and clothing rooms for House of Neighborly Service to learn about the different services available in the Life Center.

"There's a lot of places where homeless people can go. They can get food. They can get water. And they especially can find places where they will (get) education and child care," said Jordan Johnson, 16, a junior at Mountain View. "They gave us the opportunity to get food, but we had to get in line like the places where the homeless people get food. ... It's at a certain time at a certain place and it's a certain amount of food until everybody gets something."

The students got donated pizza toward the end of the evening and hot chocolate when they wanted something warm to drink.

"One of the values of the evening is the partnership that we

both work hard to help people move forward," said Lanny Hass, principal of Thompson Valley High School, adding that students got exposure to the resources available to homeless students, individuals and families. "It's reminding them that sometimes learning is little bigger than what happens in the classroom."

At the end of the night, most of the students who took part in the event said they wanted to volunteer at the Life Center, Dildine said.

"I was very impressed with the students who participated," Dildine said. "They were engaged, empathic, curious and service oriented."

The students said they wanted to do a poverty exercise next year where they would receive vouchers and role play seeking help from various agencies to get shelter, transportation and other services.

"It's very powerful, because you realize it's not easy," Dildine said. "Having agencies under one roof, which is the concept of the Life Center, makes it easier for people needing assistance."

To donate to the Angel House, visit www.angelhousehns.org, call 663-1716 or email Rebecca Brace at rbrace@honservice.org.

"We don't think we're blessed enough," Johnson said. "We want more, but if you think about it and somebody else's family, they want less for what they have."

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