

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear YFS Community Members,

I didn't grow up a Y kid — my main childhood connection was a fifth-grade field trip to Camp St. Croix. It was a great experience, minus the part where I almost broke my nose on the basketball court (thanks, Craig).

My Y journey began much later, when I was hired for a role coordinating volunteer mentors with young people in the justice system. I loved that job and could talk your ears off about the outcomes data, but I want to focus on something I learned in those first few weeks.

I sat in our small but mighty office in NE Minneapolis, intimidated by my peer cohort. They wore their passion on their sleeves. These staff were resource gurus, genuine and effective in fostering connection and building trust, and they moved mountains with the participants they supported.

On one of my first shadowing shifts, I accompanied an Outreach staff member to Park Center High School. We were meeting with a school social worker in the lead-up to graduation. She shared a fact I haven't been able to shake: 33 of the graduates who would be walking across the stage were homeless.

A testament to their individual perseverance and to the village that walked alongside them to this milestone.

But in the next moment, my mind turned. How many didn't make it? How many students — equally resilient, equally deserving — fell through the cracks? The real question isn't just why some make it against the odds. It's why we let the odds exist in the first place. And why the village that showed up for those 33 graduates wasn't there for everyone else.

We often, and rightfully, lift the against-all-odds victories. They give us hope. They remind us what's possible. The problem isn't feel-good stories. The problem is when they become the only story we tell — because that lets us believe the system is working, that resilience is enough, and that the people who don't make it just didn't try hard enough.

Those stories, told alone, mythologize meritocracy. They suggest bootstraps exist. They let the rest of us off the hook.

One goal I've made this year is to make the invisible visible, so our community can show up alongside us. In practice, that means our village, YFS staff and participants, sharing their stories and experiences. Because when hardship stays invisible, it stays individual — something to be survived alone. But the moment we shine a light, something shifts. People show up.

Last year, we served over 14,000 people in our programs. Each person was fighting a unique battle, often in silence. Our role is to see them, to steady them, and to walk with them for the long haul.

Operation Metro Surge revealed what happens when a crisis can no longer be ignored. A decentralized, community-driven response surged to life — legal observers trained, neighbors organized, rent funds raised, escorts arranged, families fed. Tens of thousands marched in subzero temperatures.

In the middle of it, our team did what our team always does: showed up. We rapidly added tailored, safe services for families, friends, and team members directly impacted. And our core work — the steady, daily delivery of housing support, basic needs, and case management — never wavered. That work is harder to see than a march, but it is no less essential. I want every YFS staff member reading this to know: I see what you carried, and what you continue to carry.

As the heightened attention and federal presence recede, the underlying challenges will not. We cannot let the struggle for stability and survival fade back into obscurity. We have been, and we will remain, here for the long haul.

Not everyone has the capacity to become a legal observer or a rapid responder. Not everyone has the means to provide rent relief. But if anything is clear in the Twin Cities these days, it is that there are innumerable ways to connect with and support community.

If you've given to YFS before, I'd love to welcome you back — whether that's renewing your support, joining us at our monthly pop-up food shelf, or simply replying to this letter to tell me what pulled you toward this work in the first place. If you're on our team reading this, thank you. You are the village.

Our role is to see, to steady, and to walk alongside — for the long haul. Thank you for doing it with us.

With gratitude,



Matt Smith



MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

These pages show what invisibility looks like in numbers — and what we're doing about it.

FOOD INSECURITY

Last year, Minnesotans made over 9 million visits to food shelves — a record high for the fourth year in a row. More than 3 million of those visits were by children. On an average month, 247,267 households walk through food shelf doors somewhere in this state.

The numbers are staggering on their own, but they don't capture the quieter arithmetic happening in households across the Twin Cities. According to the 2025 MN Food Shelf Survey:

72% of food shelf visitors report choosing between food and other necessities — healthcare, utilities, transportation, or housing.

That's the invisibility we're talking about. Not a single crisis, but a thousand small tradeoffs made in kitchens and living rooms, most of them never seen by anyone outside the family making them.

YFS response: The YMCA of the North operates multiple resource hubs, food shelves, and Good in the Hood events, distributing household essentials and groceries to families in need. We've delivered mutual aid to those impacted by federal immigration presence. **Since the start of this year alone, we've distributed over \$20,000 in groceries, household essentials, and mutual aid support.**



THE COST OF EVERYTHING IS GOING UP

The tradeoffs are happening because everything costs more. Childcare is up 40% since 2017. Rent has climbed roughly 50% in recent years. Groceries are up 32% since 2019. Vehicle insurance premiums are up 55% since 2020. Medical insurance premiums have risen 24–26% over the past five years, with another 6–7% increase coming in 2026. Even household basics — personal care products, paper goods — are up more than 30%.

For a Twin Cities family of four earning 30% of area median income — roughly \$39,720 a year — those increases don't compound slowly. They compound daily.

YFS response: Through our Annual Fund, we ensure every family can access membership and programs regardless of income. Scholarships cover childcare, swim lessons, and summer camp. For families choosing between groceries and car insurance, removing the cost of youth programs takes one pressure point off the table. **Last year, YFS distributed more than \$2 million in direct participant assistance — from a bus card to get to work, to a full month's rent to keep a family housed.**

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

HOUSING IS THE GROUND BENEATH EVERYTHING

Fifty percent of renters in this country are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing and utilities. Nationally, homelessness has increased 33% since 2020.

Closer to home, Minnesota's 2025 Point-in-Time count found 8,392 people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. In Hennepin County alone, 2,651 were in shelter or transitional housing and 427 were unsheltered. Low-cost rentals in the Twin Cities have decreased 21.8% since 2018.

And the racial inequity underneath all of it: in the Twin Cities, 76% of white households own their homes, compared to 39% of households of color — a 37-point gap that shapes every other conversation about stability, wealth, and who gets to stay put.

YFS response: Our Housing Services and Homeless Services team — 35 dedicated full-time staff — connects participants to supportive housing, shelter referrals, essential services, and transitional living programs. Housing stability is the through-line across every YFS program, because nothing else we do holds without it.

THE YOUTH BEHIND EVERY STATISTIC

These numbers aren't abstract for the young people YFS serves.

An estimated 13,300 Minnesota youth experience homelessness on their own each year. 5,800 of them are minors age 17 and younger. More than 3,000 unaccompanied homeless youth have been identified in Minnesota schools. Students experiencing housing instability graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers. Youth aging out of foster care face disproportionately high rates of homelessness, unemployment, and justice system involvement. And young people without stable housing or consistent adult support are the exact population traffickers target.

This is why YFS exists in the form we do — not just housing, not just food, but a connected response to the specific ways young people fall through cracks.

YFS response: Our programs walk alongside foster youth navigating transitions into adulthood, young people exiting or at risk of justice system involvement, survivors of trafficking and exploitation, and unaccompanied youth seeking safety. Last year, YFS served over 14,000 people across all program areas — from one-time basic needs support to sustained mentorship and life coaching. We've stopped calling this work "case management." **People aren't cases to be managed. They're people to be walked alongside, and the language we use should reflect that.**



Join Us

Volunteer

Volunteer at Good in the Hood - Our pop up monthly pop up food shelf:

volunteer.ymcanorth.org/need/

Join us the 4th Tuesday of every month to help pack and distribute monthly grocery orders for individuals and families in need.

It's a wonderful way to connect with YFS and the community. For questions please email: Julie.Ashburn@ymcamn.org

YMCA Youth Resource Line

763-493-3052

The YRL connects young people to YMCA Youth & Family Services programs, including Outreach, Prevention, Supportive Housing programs, Foster care program, Enough. program, and Youth Justice services. Most programs serve ages 18-24, with some options for younger youth and up to age 28, depending on the program.

What to expect after you leave a message with the YRL:

All calls will be returned within the day you contacted. If you contact outside of business hours, your call will be returned the following day.

It is very important that your voicemail is set up and has space so we can leave a message if you miss our call.

Once we get in contact with you, we provide a brief conversation to connect you to the right program or referral.

Please note:

- This is not a crisis line
- We do not operate shelters; YMCA uses the same public shelter listings via YSN.
- We are unable to provide same-day rental assistance

Donations

There are two primary ways to support the work of Youth and Family Services.

The first is through a contribution to the YFS annual fund, linked below. With the reduction in federal funds, increasing pressure has fallen on states and localities to fill the void. Sustained gifts from our supporters ensure we can continue showing up for this work over the long haul.

The second is through in-kind donations—whether for the Resource Hub or to support participant and staff recognition.

YFS Annual Fund: ymcanorth.org/give/yfs



Questions?

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