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Three Local Organizations Receive United Way Community Impact Grant

Three year, \$528,300 grant will fund Community Resource Center to aid at-risk and homeless youth aging out of the foster care system

CONROE, Texas (August 7, 2014)-- Montgomery County Youth Services, Angel Reach, and CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County were recently jointly awarded a grant for \$ 528,300 over 3 years from the United Way to fund a Community Resource Center to aid at-risk and homeless young adults who have aged out of the foster care system in transitioning to become successful, functioning adult citizens.

Young people often become homeless due to family conflict, which includes divorce, neglect, or abuse. One study showed that 46% of runaway and homeless youth had been physically abused and another 17% were forced into unwanted sexual activity by a household member.

A history of foster care correlates with becoming homeless at an earlier age and remaining homeless for a longer period of time. Some youth living in residential or institutional placements become homeless upon discharge—they are too old for foster care but are discharged with no housing or income support. One national study reported that more than one in five youth who arrived at shelters came directly from foster care, and that more than one in four had been in foster care in the previous year.

Homeless numbers in Montgomery County are staggering. The Point-in-Time homeless count conducted on January 23, 2014 indicated 617 homeless people in Montgomery County. Of those, 64 were known to be ages 16 -24, plus an additional 121 where age was not identified. The six school districts in Montgomery County reported 115 homeless students enrolled in school, grades 9 – 12, on the same date. In the last two years, Montgomery County Youth Services and Angel Reach have seen an average 75% increase in the number of youth coming to them for services. Angel Reach turns away 2—3 youth every week that do not currently qualify for their services. Ultimately, all of these figures show that the population of homeless youth in Montgomery County is growing every day and that growth is expected to continue.

While the number of youth ages 16—24 are only part of the total homeless population—they are a very costly part. According to HUD, it costs taxpayers more than \$27,000 a year for a homeless person to be on the streets in the Houston area (more than \$40,000 nationally) and homeless youth ages 18-24 cost society more than any other age group.

There are few resources available in Montgomery County for homeless youth. What few do exist are spread out in various locations and serve a limited clientele. Angel Reach provides a best practice model that can be leveraged and expanded to serve more youth. MCYS serves the homeless in its Street Outreach and BridgeWay Shelter programs. However, currently Angel Reach and MCYS can only serve a fraction of the homeless youth population. This project, unique in design and practice, will bring together resources from across the county in one location to serve homeless youth as well as youth at risk of being homeless. This single resource center will house specialized youth counselors and caseworkers. Unlike other homeless resources currently in Montgomery County, this center will serve all youth in the target age range and connect them with the appropriate service or level of care needed. This project will harness community resources through financial, business, and educational partnerships to connect youth to jobs, banking, housing, and additional educational or vocational training.

By connecting and providing homeless and at risk youth with direct services, training, educational opportunities, potential employers, and banking leaders, this project will dramatically improve the employment opportunities for this target

population. In doing so, the financial stability and overall health of these youth will also improve. This initiative will strive to enact an overall change to the outcomes of homeless youth.

Fundamentally, the project will expand and build upon the current successful programs of Montgomery County Youth Services, Angel Reach and CASA, three organizations that have already established best practices for serving homeless and foster care youth. In this project, Montgomery County Youth Services will provide financial management, shelter services for youth under the age of 18, outreach, and counseling services. Angel Reach, already a community leader providing case management and life skills training services to homeless youth, will expand to provide services to all homeless youth, not just those that are homeless after aging out of the state foster care system. CASA will leverage its resources to educate the community regarding the issues around foster care and youth homelessness, influence local and state elected officials and provide mentorship for youth aging out of the foster care system. These organizations will shelter age-appropriate youth in their housing programs and work to leverage their efforts with other community resources to obtain outside professional services as needed. These organizations are known for their dedicated and innovative approaches to working with homeless youth. The project expands that expertise to include more young people. The project's design is built on first year limited service to clients, a conclusive research project to determine the size and scope of youth homelessness, then expansion in years two and three for the hiring of case managers, shelter operations staff, outreach staff, and fundraising and administration staff.

With the passage of Texas Senate Bill 717 last legislative session, homeless youth ages 16—18 can now choose their own transitional housing. There is a community obligation to provide shelter for these youth and since they now have a choice, it becomes critical that there are appropriate, safe options available for these youth to make. For this reason, this project will call for development of additional sheltering space in year one and larger expansion of sheltering operations in year three.

This integrated collaboration combines three strong partner organizations from Montgomery County to address homeless youth. Each one of these organizations has a vested interest to see that this program is a success. This project takes the vital work that each organization does and expands it to serve more youth and together affect greater change.

For more information about Angel Reach, visit www.AngelReach.org; CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County at www.CASASpeaks4Kids.com or call (936) 441-5437; or Montgomery County Youth Services at www.youthmc.org.

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Angel Reach:

Angel Reach is an organization that works with aged-out foster youth to assist them in getting a job, learning everyday life skills, helping them to get their identification cards and driver's license, and then eventually assisting them into independent living. It operates out of a house on N. San Jacinto in Conroe - this is Angel Reach's headquarters, food pantry, transportation center, counselor's and accountant's office, driving class, and as the entry point for homeless area youth to apply for one of eight spots at the home. It is a home filled with expectations, rules, encouragement, struggles, love and above all a personal connection often denied them in foster care. Once the youth finish the assessment program they have the opportunity to be moved to either the men's home, women's duplex or young mother's home if they have children. It also offers day services to youth not living at Angel Reach, including transportation. There is also a Kinship Program which helps the families of foster children who are being taken care of by their own family members. More than 50 volunteers help out each week with the Transitional Living Program and the Kinship Program. We are very excited to partner with CASA and Montgomery County Youth Services to provide services for all homeless youth.

CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County:

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are appointed by the Court to speak up for the best interest of children who have been removed from their parents and are under the Court's jurisdiction. CASA's goal is to provide a court-appointed volunteer to serve as Guardian ad Litem for every child in the foster care system. For the past 23 years, CASA has been training volunteers, raising awareness in the community, and working to stop the cycle of child abuse in Montgomery County. Learn more about CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County at www.casaspeaks4kids.com and on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CASACHildAdvocatesofMontgomeryCounty>

Montgomery County Youth Services:

Montgomery County Youth Services (MCYS) provides crisis counseling, shelter programs, and prevention services to strengthen families, keep youth in school, and prepare them to be productive citizens. MCYS seeks to empower youth and their families by building on their existing strengths, expanding their opportunities, and enhancing their lives. The agency's six locations provide direct and indirect services to thousands of youth and families annually. MCYS has strong collaborative relationships with community agencies, businesses, churches and school districts. MCYS was established in 1979 by a group of community leaders who developed juvenile justice prevention services for at-risk youth in the community. MCYS obtained their not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) status in September 1979.

