

# Homeless youth get a welcome message of Christian caring at Christmas

Young people experiencing homelessness and trauma can find some comfort that Edmonton's Christian communities are thinking about them – and helping them – at Christmas.

The annual [No Room in the Inn](#) campaign appeals to the people of churches in Edmonton and area at Christmas time to support those who do not have adequate and safe housing. Each year the money goes to a designated charity. For the first time in its 19-year history, No Room in the Inn will be focused on homeless youth.

"We were just ecstatic," said Jessica Day, programs manager at Youth Empowerment and Support Services, the Whyte Avenue youth emergency shelter which will be this year's No Room in the Inn recipient.

YESS's 24-bed Nexus shelter houses 650 individual young people per year, from ages 15 to 21.

Day said about 70 per cent are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. Others are dealing with issues of addictions, mental health and gangs.

"It's nice to know that we can connect to the Christian community, because we do have kids that come from a Christian background and that's a strong foundation for them," said Day.

"If you are a youth who's used to going to church every Sunday or is used to being able to talk to a priest and now due to their trauma they no longer have that connection, that's a trauma in itself."

Based on the biblical story of Mary and Joseph on the night Jesus was born, the No Room in the Inn initiative has raised nearly \$1 million since it began in 1999.

## CAMIEL'S STORY:

A youth came into the Nexus emergency shelter some time ago – a fifteen-year-old girl who was not only figuring out who she was as an individual, navigating regular teenage angst and hormones, and managing strained connections to family and community – and she was scared.

This young lady came from a disruptive home. She had experienced very serious neglect with a mixture of emotional, financial, mental and physical abuse.

To her this was "love". This was how a family unit worked and lived together. This was normal. Money was tool to gain control and buy love. Ignoring basic needs was a "justified consequence". Hearing regularly she had no value, with slanderous comments, left a slow burn and unlimited fuel for mental health issues to flourish. That was "love".

The campaign will distribute 12,000 collection envelopes to parishes and congregations in the Edmonton region, including the United Church of Canada, as well as Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Quaker, Moravian, Christian Reformed, and Lutheran churches. Many donate their entire Christmas Eve collections to No Room in the Inn.

The money raised this year will help pay for a \$220,000 renovation of the four washrooms in YESS's building in Edmonton's French Quarter neighbourhood. Two of the washrooms are located in the emergency overnight shelter and the other two in the residential program, Graham's Place, which houses eight youth around-the-clock.

The Graham's Place washrooms haven't been renovated in nearly 30 years. They will receive new fixtures, plumbing, electrical, paint, accessories, vanities and countertops.

Eileen Papulkas said the upgrades will prevent future plumbing issues and decrease the amount of time YESS staff need to dedicate to repairs and maintenance.

"The longevity of our facility will be increased through this renovation and will allow our organization to continue to offer support to the community of homeless and at-risk youth in Edmonton," said Papulkas, the revenue development and communications supervisor at YESS.

"These youth will benefit from the renovations through increased self-esteem, self-respect, and safety through their understanding that it matters enormously to all that they

That was her family unit.

Once this youth began self-medicating her emotions and feeding them with drugs, she quickly found herself further away from all that she had known – unhealthy or not. She had nothing to build a foundation from.

While couch-surfing and utilizing her youthful looks for companions who had a bed for her to share, she eventually heard about Nexus.

Once arrived, she was bombarded with information including program rules, expectations, and various resources. Staff assured her that she would become more familiar with things in time, and assured her that resources and information were available throughout her journey.

This youth is now faced with the task of making adult decisions during a fundamental stage of development.

She is learning to navigate her self-worth and connecting this with her negative habits. She often struggles with boundaries, and still searches for validation. Her journey is substantial, but her perseverance is unmatched.

This young girl is growing with confidence and is learning the importance of self-worth. She is navigating the resources and barriers with proper help and support. There are breakdowns, there are tantrums, and there is a lot of laughter, but she is growing and thriving.

Her goals are to return to school and get into the trades. She manages sobriety and is learning the true meaning of independence:

- She has set healthy boundaries with her family and is

have clean, well-maintained washrooms available to them. In addition, a well-maintained building instills confidence in donors whose contributions help keep our programs running and our youth supported.”



**Julien Hammond**

processing their impacts and her trauma.

- She is well connected throughout YESS and utilizes the night shelter, Nexus, and the day program, The Resource Centre, almost daily.
- She is managing her physical health with the help of our doctors and nurse practitioner.
- She is working towards employment with the help of staff and employment coordinators.
- She is now safe and learning what healthy living is while being supported by the YESS staff.

Success is not always measured in a transition with one of our youth becoming a perfect community member. Success for our team is much more than that, much more in-depth.

For us, success is a teenage boy quitting opioids after several years of abuse. Success is a young woman fleeing domestic violence and seeking appropriate help. Success is that young kid staying sober for the first time. Success is feeling heard, healthy, and happy. Success is a fifteen-year-old girl with a new-found ability to say she's 'worth it'.

*Courtesy of Jessica Day, YESS Programs Manager*

The amount of money raised through the No Room in the Inn campaign is never entirely certain until the end, said campaign chair Julien Hammond, coordinator of the Archdiocese of Edmonton's Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

Last year, churches raised nearly \$60,000 to help renovate an apartment building that is home to low-income families and people struggling with mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. And in 2016, the campaign raised more

than \$76,000 for a Sherwood Park women's shelter.

The Archdiocese has participated in the No Room in the Inn campaign since it began. On Dec. 10, staff of the Archdiocese, Catholic Cemeteries, St. Joseph Seminary, and Newman Theological College presented 80 backpacks full of Christmas gifts and \$1,000 cash raised from their Advent Dinner raffle to YESS.

"Every donation that comes in is appreciated, whether it's somebody bringing in the six pairs of socks that they bought or the person who donates all the backpacks, somebody who gives \$1,000 cash, or the little kids who bring in all the candy canes," said Day. "It's all appreciated across the board and we would not be able to do what we do without them."

About \$1.1 million of the YESS's annual \$4.2-million operating budget comes from government sources, mostly Alberta, but the bulk comes from donations. At this time of year, as donations come in, Day said both youth and staff at YESS begin to feel the Christmas spirit.

"When it's emotional and traumatic and we're dealing with the not-so-positive side, when we get to see the people that are giving the donations, it reminds us of why we're here, which is the kindness and the giving spirit and the true nature of Christmas."



Jessica Day, YESS Programs Manager, says YESS's 24-bed Nexus shelter houses and feeds 650 individual young people per year. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

Papulkas added: "We can all get really wrapped up with our families and our plans for the holidays. When we really keep others in mind, it's really the true spirit of the holidays and it really gives you a true sense of the season."

For more information on how to get involved or donate, visit [No Room in the Inn](#)