



**“We Know What We Can Do”
Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio (COHIO)’s
Youth Empowerment Program**

“We have the voice. We know what we can do.”

At 18 years old Aliwya Sharif has done more than many adults. She has been a spokesperson at press conferences, an advocate with elected officials, and a leader to her peers. She has also been homeless and has struggled for stability in fragile life circumstances.

As a member of the Youth Empowerment Program, Aliwyah is one of a dynamic group of youth between 11 and 24 years of age who are homeless or nearly homeless and coping with poverty and instability in their daily lives. They are children living on the streets or “couch surfing” between friends and family. Some are runaways. Others have “aged out” of foster care and are considered legally independent, though they do not yet have a place to live and a means to support themselves. YEP’s remarkable work to support these youth and to sustain their work as advocates drew the respect of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, which began supporting YEP in 2002.

There are an astounding number of so-called “transitional” youth in Ohio. YEP’s parent organization, the Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Ohio (COHHIO) estimates that 60,000 young people will experience homelessness in the state each year. It’s a crisis, says YEP Director Angela Lariviere, and one that most people prefer not to acknowledge, let alone confront.

Lariviere seems inexhaustible. Every young person who comes through YEP’s doors – usually referred by social service agencies, schools or friends – is provided with referrals or support to address their own personal needs. She also lets them know that, by working with other young people around the state, they can impact the policies and practices that fail to offer real help to children and families like themselves. Lariviere channels interested kids into a statewide network of “youth councils.” The councils are staffed and run by YEP members and meet on a regular basis. In addition to offering a haven of stability, the council meetings provide the opportunity for young people to “collectivize” their experiences and talk about taking action on their own behalf. Once immediate crises are addressed, says Lariviere, experienced YEP leaders turn conversations into learning sessions about the systemic problems that create these hurdles for young people, and how they themselves have the first-hand experience that gives them the right to help solve them.

Not surprisingly, much of YEP's advocacy centers around issues of housing and education. Homeless youth consistently struggle to stay in school and face serious obstacles to enrolling in a public school: because they don't have a home, there is no "neighborhood school" with a guaranteed seat for them. They have no one to sign for textbooks or to affirm their eligibility for a free lunch. There is a constant stream of affronts: Alwiya and another YEP member were stymied when they learned that the school expected them to *pay* to take some required high school courses. Their inability to come up with the cash could have cost them their diplomas. But YEP helped them negotiate waivers so that they could complete the coursework and graduate with their classmates. And now they are investigating the legality of such fees and policies.

"When you're in a shelter, you don't really think you can do anything about your situation," says Alwiya. "YEP gives every kid the confidence to make a change. Now, whenever something's wrong, I know that I can stand up and say something."

This is a remarkable statement from a girl who is no doubt routinely underestimated by adults daily. That Alwiya has developed this confidence and effectiveness is a tribute to YEP's consistent focus on empowering young people like her. Lariviere says that many people under-estimate the skills that homeless youth have honed just to survive. "These young people are constantly navigating systems that don't have their unique needs in mind," says Lariviere. "Many of them get very, very good at figuring out alternative and creative solutions."

Through its work, YEP has become a respected voice for youth in Ohio. Their impact has been astonishing, despite the fragile circumstances many YEP members confront. They fought for and won changes in state policies that blocked boys thirteen and older from staying in shelters with their families. In Columbus, they organized to get the YWCA to build a new family center to replace an overcrowded, dilapidated and rodent-infested family shelter; this effort took five years and a \$7 million capital campaign. They successfully fought to ensure that young people would not be excluded from a bill to raise the minimum wage in the state of Ohio. They have even taken on Congress; several times a year, YEP members drive to Washington to meet with their congressional delegations and describe how policies enacted under capitol domes impact young people living on the streets.

They are often told that they are "amazing," says Alwiya. "What's 'amazing' is that these decisions get made at meetings where they don't even *have* any young people! It doesn't make any sense to me," she says pointedly.

New opportunities for advocacy present themselves all the time. At a statewide meeting in the summer of 2007, several students started sharing their frustration at being barred from school athletic teams because they don't have health insurance. Lariviere turned the conversation from complaining to action. She noted that the federally-funded State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, was being

reauthorized in Congress, and that one of the proposals was to expand the program to cover tens of thousands more children. The young people came up with the idea of collecting 156,000 signatures – the estimated number of uninsured kids in Ohio – to present to their members of Congress. Two days later, Alwiya was one of 3 YEP leaders to speak at a press conference announcing their “Band-Aid campaign.” She proudly held up the petitions that the young people had designed – rows of individual band-aid in columns that Ohio residents will be asked to sign, signaling their support for an expanded SCHIP program.

“These issues affect everyone,” says Alwiya. “Everybody deserves health care. We make it our business to do things like this – because no one else is.”

Lariviere agrees. “We have to keep young people at the table with decision-makers. They tell the truths that contradict stereotypes or statistics. In Ohio, we’ve told those stories enough that powerful adults are starting to hear us, and demand answers.” And change policies.