



# Coming Out of the Shadows

## Pathfinders Seeks to Shine a Light on Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

Homeless encampments are a visible sign of a community in stress. But there is a much less visible symptom that many people don't even realize exists – youth and young adult homelessness. Whether living on the streets with their families or fending for themselves, these youth are forging a path to their future. In order to better

understand the challenges they face and the practical solutions that would provide them with safety and stability, the Milwaukee Business Journal sat down with representatives of Pathfinders which provides housing and support services to youths and young adults experiencing homelessness, to shed light on this often unseen segment of society.

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## MEET THE PANELISTS



**TIM BAACK**  
President & CEO  
Pathfinders

Tim Baack provides key leadership regarding the organization's operations, administration, budgeting, program development and human resources. He is a state licensed professional counselor and has been with the agency since 1988. Tim serves as Board President of the Wisconsin Association for Homeless and Runaway Services and member of the Board of Directors of Milwaukee County's Continuum of Care. In 2012, he was named a White House Champion of Change for his work to address youth homelessness.



**RENEE KIRNBERGER**  
Chief Development Officer  
Pathfinders

As Chief Development Officer, Renee brings her expertise to Pathfinders' philanthropic and communications initiatives and implements strategies to increase the organization's recognition in the community. Renee has more than 25 years of experience in public relations, marketing, fundraising and nonprofit management and is an active member of Professional Dimensions and TEMPO Milwaukee.



**DESHANDA WILLIAMS-CLARK**  
Chief Program Officer  
Pathfinders

DeShanda has been in a variety of roles prior to her becoming Chief Program Officer in 2022 where she oversees all programmatic operations. She is a seasoned social work professional with background experiences from Walker's Point Youth Shelter, Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services and Nia Imani Family. She continues to advance her efforts in support of youth experiencing housing instability by serving on the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

### **MODERATOR: Why should the business community care about youth homelessness?**

**TIM BAACK:** We should be concerned any time we see an increase in homelessness because it speaks to a diminishing quality of life. Homelessness is increasing by 12 percent across the country. When we talk about families with children, it is more than 15 percent. The business community should be particularly concerned about youth homelessness because it is one of the greatest predictors of homelessness in adulthood and future generations.

**RENEE KIRNBERGER:** Youth homelessness isn't an issue that just affects a certain segment of our community or a certain neighborhood. It affects us holistically and what we are able to be as a metropolitan area, a state and a country.

**DESHANDA WILLIAMS-CLARK:** Because of youth homelessness, we are missing out on opportunities for these younger folks to contribute to the community. We need to make sure we are supporting them so that they become healthy adults.

### **MODERATOR: How are young people impacted by homelessness in Milwaukee County?**

**BAACK:** Estimates from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago indicate that nearly 12,000 people in Milwaukee County between the ages of 10 and 24 experience at least one episode of homelessness each year. And it has been documented that 6.4 percent of students in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) experienced homelessness during the 2022-2023 school year, which is the most recent data available. That is an enormous amount of young people.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** MPS identifies more than 4,600 youth as part of its Homeless Education Program. Young people have a hard time prioritizing education, yet we know that education leads to employment, income and career opportunities, as well as other skills that you need to be stable and self-sufficient.

**KIRNBERGER:** The National Center for Homeless Education found that the number of young people experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year was greater than the total population of children in 28 states.

**BAACK:** And it is even harder to estimate the number of young people who are unstably housed, young people who are on the precipice of hitting the streets or are living in an unsafe place.

**MODERATOR: If this is such a big issue,**

### **why don't we hear more about it?**

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** Sometimes it is difficult to see. Many people recognize homelessness as encampments or people standing on the corner asking for things. Youth and young adult homelessness is harder to see. Because they are naturally vulnerable and more likely to be exploited or trafficked if people know they are homeless, they try not to be seen. There is also a stigma around letting people and systems know that you are having a hardship in your family or household, so they don't want to reach out.

**BAACK:** DeShanda just made a really important point about the stigma that surrounds homelessness and housing instability. Homeless older adults tend to congregate at an encampment with tents and trailers. They are very visible. Youth work very hard not to stand out because they know it adds to the likelihood they will be exploited. They either gather on their own or go to places that are less visible or more difficult to find. It is why we do street-based outreach. Because they trust us, young people tell us where we can find other young people who are living in unsafe situations.

**KIRNBERGER:** Not knowing about this issue is not a knock on anyone. We understand that it is difficult to jump into and that it is not easy to learn about,

which is why it is so important for us to talk about it. I think many people have had experiences with young people who they did not realize were homeless. They may have had a kid's friend stay with them for a while, or know a college student who needed a place to stay for the summer. They may have known they were going through something, but didn't think of it as youth homelessness.

### **MODERATOR: Who are these young people? Tell us about them.**

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** Pathfinders provides space and services for youth as young as 11 and as old as 25. These people are strong leaders. They want to be future case managers and advocates. They are very empathetic with people who are having experiences similar to them. They help us recruit and onboard staff. They help us determine the services that are needed in the community. They are a spectrum of different identities. They are young parents. They are queer. They are male, female and non-binary. They feel very strongly about ending youth homelessness and reducing the harm associated with it. They are looking for ways that we can improve our system and the ways we can prioritize funding and money around youth needs.

**BAACK:** They are disproportionately youth of color, they are disproportionately

queer-identified and almost all of them are living well below the poverty limit. They have some of the biggest hearts and the greatest amount of grace.

**KIRNBERGER:** Although many of them have experienced generational trauma, they are compassionate, warm, funny and bright. They are thoughtful and creative. Not a day goes by where we are not amazed by what they bring to the table.

**BAACK:** One of the most powerful images I have is of the youth leaders who have stepped forward, despite all of the adversity and vulnerability that they've faced, to use their voice to talk to our legislators and inform them about what it means to be a homeless young person and the solutions they see for preventing youth and young adult homelessness.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** They just need a chance. Some people are afforded many opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them. Our young people don't always get those opportunities.

**MODERATOR:** **The question of whether people experiencing homelessness can be fined or jailed for sleeping in a public place reached the highest court this year. Talk about the recent SCOTUS ruling in City of Grants Pass v Johnson. What is the impact of that ruling around the country?**

**BAACK:** That ruling was exceptionally disappointing. The Supreme Court said municipalities, even when they lack sufficient emergency housing or shelter for people experiencing homelessness, can fine or jail someone for living on the streets or in public areas. Homelessness is never really a choice. It is a situation that people find themselves in. We have been fortunate thus far in this community because we have collectively chosen to take a different approach. Milwaukee County has implemented a right-to-shelter ordinance. We understand that putting people in jail or giving them fines that they will never be able to pay is not how you end homelessness. We can't criminalize our way out of this problem. Instead, we need to create avenues to get people safely off the streets and give them the basic resources they need to be better positioned to deal with their education, employment and mental wellness issues more effectively.

**MODERATOR:** **Have any laws criminalizing homelessness been proposed in Wisconsin?**

**BAACK:** We have seen a number of efforts statewide during the last year. Legislation very similar to the legislation taken up by the Supreme Court was proposed. We had elected officials who wanted to use state parks to create

forced encampments where people experiencing homelessness would be required to go. There have been other efforts to require municipalities to impose fines on people who were found on the streets. Fortunately, we have been able to block those efforts, often through the governor's vetoes.

**MODERATOR:** **What would these laws do to young people experiencing housing instability and homelessness?**

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** Criminalization should not be an alternative to meeting someone's basic needs. It should not be an alternative to shelter and housing. Criminalization just tacks on more barriers to accessing housing and employment. They will be further marginalized and stigmatized, and we as a community will end up paying a higher cost because they will be worse off.

**BAACK:** Think through this scenario. Someone is found sleeping in a public space. The typical approach to addressing that situation is a citation. How is that person going to be able to pay the fine if they don't have the money to afford an apartment? If they don't pay that fine, they may get another fine. At some point it will become significant enough that they can be arrested. If they are convicted, they will have a criminal

record, which is one of the most common barriers to accessing housing because landlords do background checks.

**MODERATOR:** **What is the cost of youth homelessness to our community?**

**KIRNBERGER:** There is an estimated cost of \$26,433 per year for every young person experiencing homelessness in Wisconsin, based on research from the National Network for Youth. That adds up to a lifetime cost per individual of \$870,000. That is money we are spending on mental health costs, emergency room visits, health care, incarceration, the justice system, lost wages, lost taxes and other costs.

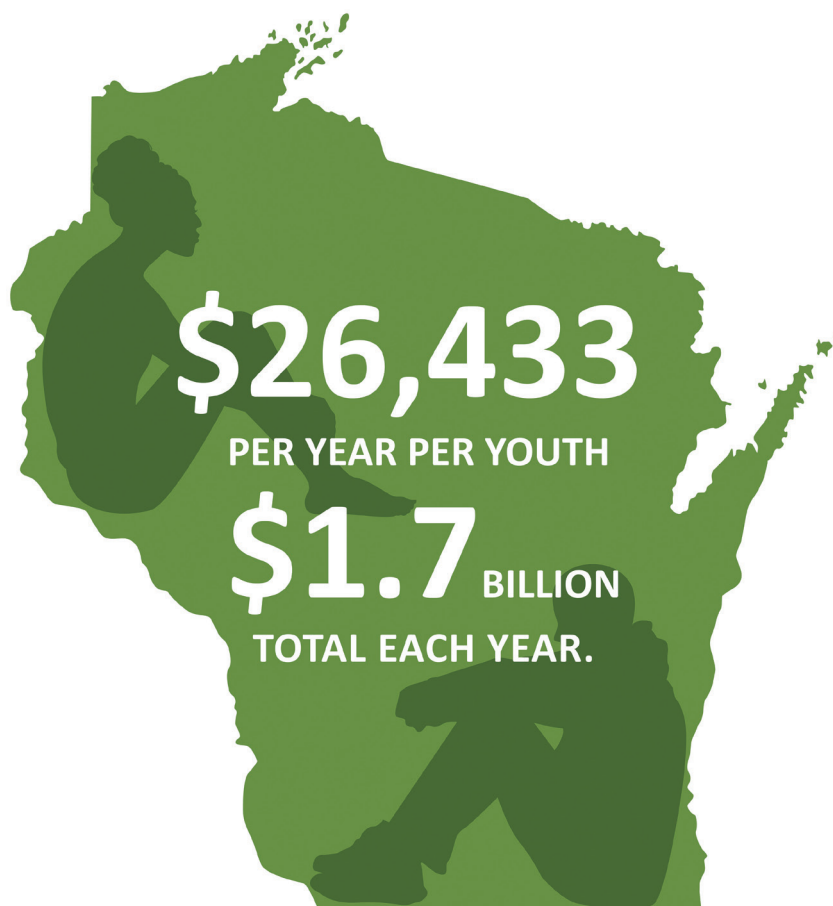
**BAACK:** If you extrapolate that to the state of Wisconsin, it would be an annual expense of \$1.7 billion.

**KIRNBERGER:** And that is a reason the business community should care. It affects every single citizen. We believe if we can intervene and stop that lifelong cycle of homelessness, we have a much better chance of ending it generationally.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** It is also a public health issue because homelessness can mean more frequent visits to the emergency room and to hospitals. It can also mean sickness and death because

## THE COST OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN WISCONSIN

IN HEALTHCARE, CRIME AND VICTIM COSTS, LOST EARNINGS, EXCESS TAX BURDEN, ETC. PLUS THE IMMEASURABLE LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO CONTRIBUTE TO OUR CULTURE AND COMMUNITY.



people don't go to the hospital when they should.

#### **MODERATOR: What is the solution?**

**BAACK:** The reality is that it is a very solvable problem because we know what works. It is housing accompanied by supportive services. The key to having effective housing is providing individually tailored support that young people need. By that I mean case management, employment support, education, and mental wellness. Well over two out of three people we provide supportive housing to never resurface in the adult homeless service system. That is pretty astounding.

**KIRNBERGER:** There are a lot of people in situations where a health care bill, a heating bill or an auto repair may keep them from paying rent. We support them by helping with those one-time nominal bills so that they can remain stably housed. Housing people and working on upstream homelessness prevention is really what we believe is the best solution.

**BAACK:** There are funding streams that are explicitly limited to only those people who are already living on the street. Rationing resources that way creates a situation where we miss an opportunity to address this issue in a much more cost-effective and humane way by preventing it from being a problem in the first place.

#### **MODERATOR: What ideas do young people who experience homelessness have about how to address it?**

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** They want to be given the opportunity to be housed. They want people living on the streets to feel safe and not criminalized. They want to make sure they have access to restrooms and clean areas. They also want to know how we can reach out to funders and legislators and other folks to make sure that the appropriations dedicated to youth homelessness aren't cut. They want to know how they can use their voices to let people know that these programs work.

**KIRNBERGER:** They want you to know that they weren't taught how to figure it all out. They did it on their own. Instead of stigmatizing them as lazy, they want you to see that they are capable.

**BAACK:** The other thing that young people continually tell us is that what they need are opportunities to use their

own voice and to exercise their own choice. When it comes to housing, they want the same opportunity that many of us have – which is to choose where they are living, in neighborhoods where they feel safe and comfortable, where they feel welcomed and dignified, and where they have access to educational, job and childcare opportunities. They don't want to be put in a building where all of the “homeless kids” get put. They don't want to be put in the neighborhoods that they are attempting to leave.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** There is also an expressed want and need for them to be able to access more recreational opportunities, so they aren't criminalized for having to hang out on the street.

#### **MODERATOR: Why aren't current efforts meeting the need?**

**BAACK:** As a community, we have failed to adequately prioritize youth and adult homelessness so we don't properly delegate the available resources. We are working to change that. Our collective efforts have resulted in an additional \$3 million of funding through the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program over the next two years. The more we can help people understand the extent of youth and young adult homelessness, the more people understand that current efforts aren't meeting the needs as we have been able to measure them.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** We need to address this issue, and we need to appropriate the funding for the agencies that are leading it. Pathfinders is one of Wisconsin's most comprehensive agencies for youth experiencing homelessness but our funding is often being decreased. That is not a sustainable model for anything, but especially when we are talking about trying to swim upstream to end youth homelessness.

**KIRNBERGER:** We are facing some challenges. We are seeing a \$750,000 cut for services for people who have been sexually exploited and trafficked. That is a huge intersecting issue with youth homelessness. Because of the cut, we are wrapping up some work. We are transitioning some staff, and our young people are rightly sad and scared. They want to know who is going to support them when they get raped. Our volunteers want to know who is going to help a 12-year-old who is sitting in a police station being questioned about a crime that was committed against him or her.

#### **MODERATOR: Why is addressing youth homelessness a worthwhile investment in our community's future?**

**KIRNBERGER:** These young people are future leaders. They are going to be in charge of running this community. We cannot afford to lose this much knowledge, this much talent simply because we refuse to accept the fact that housing is a right that people have.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** People need to understand that it is an issue that not only affects your business and community, but it can also affect you as a person.

**BAACK:** Homelessness, at a very fundamental level, speaks to the quality of life for the entire community. I don't think any one of us would like to have an encampment of homeless people showing up in our backyard. But by moving the problem out of sight, we miss the opportunity to actually prevent homelessness, which is the more humane, dignified and compassionate thing to do. And it is the cheaper thing to do, which is why I think the whole community should care.

#### **MODERATOR: What can business leaders and community members do to help?**

**BAACK:** They can start by reaching out to their elected officials and telling them that homelessness in general, and youth homelessness in particular, needs to be more of a priority and to have the resources that we know will prevent it. If people are uncomfortable doing that on their own, Pathfinders can help them. They can also come and volunteer. We are reliant on volunteers to help us do the heavy lifting. There are plenty of ways they can help.

**WILLIAMS-CLARK:** As business people, you can look at how you recruit, hire and employ people. Consider what you can do to make sure people are getting access to adequate income and childcare. And you can work with agencies like Pathfinders to give youth a chance with the life skills they need.

**KIRNBERGER:** Join us. Educate yourself on this issue. Pathfinders is inviting you to the table. We look forward to talking with you.

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