

Amplifying Youth Voices: The Power of Client Leadership

When The Night Ministry launched **Youth 4 Truth (Y4T)** in 2016, the goal was both transformative and straightforward: to create a space where young people in its housing programs could speak for themselves and shape the services they rely on. Nearly a decade later, the program is thriving, now under the leadership of Michelle Thomas, Client Development Specialist, who manages Y4T along with two other advisory boards.

Michelle began her journey with The Night Ministry in 2017 as part of the Youth Outreach Team. Her natural passion and drive have carried her into a leadership role where she now oversees three advisory groups designed to elevate the voices of those with lived experience of homelessness. Alongside Y4T, she leads a statewide Youth Advisory Group, funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services, and a Client Advisory Board for adults who access services through The Night Ministry's outreach and health programs.

For Michelle, these boards are platforms of empowerment. Participants are compensated for their time and expertise, an intentional recognition of the value of their lived experiences. "Being able to offer cash stipends demonstrates to participants that their voice is powerful, their expertise is valuable, and that they are worth investing in," she explains.

The results have been profound. Michelle recalls one young mother who arrived in Chicago with her two-year-old daughter after being turned away from her family home.



Youth 4 Truth advisory board members attend a meeting at The Night Ministry headquarters in Bucktown.

Through Y4T, she found her voice, setting goals in public speaking and advocacy. Months later, she stood before policymakers in Washington, DC, sharing her story with confidence and conviction. "She didn't hold back," Michelle says. "It was awe-inspiring." The work is about building a movement. Whether speaking at national conferences or connecting youth across Illinois, she believes incorporating client voice is no longer optional—it's essential.

"Giving clients a platform and a sense of agency has been a game-changer," Michelle says.

As she looks ahead, Michelle's vision is to maintain momentum, break down barriers, and provide opportunities that enable participants to grow both personally and professionally. For her, the voices of those who have lived the struggle hold the key to lasting solutions.

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Art, Heart, and Hope



Longtime volunteer Jan Rotter at West Town

Jan Rotter carefully arranges paintbrushes and colored pencils on the table in the lounge at West Town, The Night Ministry's interim housing facility for youth ages 14–21, preparing for another afternoon with the young people she's come to know and love. It's a ritual she's repeated countless times during her 20-year tenure as a volunteer.

A former art instructor and day camp director for the Chicago Park District, she took a sabbatical to raise her three children. When the kids got older, Jan was eager to find an outlet for both her time and her creative side. She volunteered at numerous organizations and explored several opportunities, but it wasn't until she connected with The Night Ministry that she truly felt there was an opportunity to really get to know unhoused youth better.

It was serendipitous. Her art skills and nurturing manner were a perfect fit, and she felt that she was making a real difference. "Although they can stay up to 120 days at West Town Open Door Shelter, most youth are there only several days, sometimes weeks, & occasionally months before they're placed in more permanent housing," Jan reflects, "but for that time, I try to help create some stability and, through art, provide an outlet for their creativity."

"I try to help create some stability and, through art, provide an outlet for their creativity."

Given her love of art and creative expression, it's no surprise that Halloween is Jan's favorite holiday. She and her husband, Jerry have hosted their legendary "Rotten Rotter's Halloween Party" for many years and have raised thousands of dollars for youth programming at The Night Ministry. With the donations, she has been able to get supplies for art projects and essential items such as duffle bags and backpacks. She has even taken them on some fun outings to see what Chicago has to offer.

"My favorite outings have included attending plays at the Steppenwolf Theatre and concerts by the Black Ensemble. They get to experience things they've never had opportunities to before."

She recognizes the stress felt by the youth she encounters at West Town. She is non-judgmental, kind, and has an easy-going nature that makes it easy for them to talk with her when they need someone who will listen.

The staff thinks she is amazing and loves her energy, creativity, and what she brings to the program. "Jan's boundless energy wraps around the weary and provides a calm presence that transforms despair into dreams through her art. We are so lucky to have her share her gifts with our youth," says Felitha Jones-Patterson, Director of Youth Programs at The Night Ministry.

Jan hopes that in some small way, she has helped each of the young people she has encountered while on their path to stable housing and a better future.

"I remember going to the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, and the girl at the reception desk recognized me," Jan recalls fondly. "She was a former client from West Town, and there she was, doing great, working at a museum. It really meant a lot—I loved seeing that."

Keep Our Neighbors Warm This Winter

Too many of our neighbors are facing winter without the things they need to stay warm and safe. Give warmth and comfort this season by providing winter essentials for individuals and families served through our outreach and health programs.

How You Can Help:

- Donate winter supplies and warm clothing items
- Donate online at thenightministry.org/donate
- Donate through our Amazon Wish List



Contact Maya Crowl-Kinney at maya@thenightministry.org

A Year in Review



The Night Ministry takes a close look at how our programs are doing so we can learn, grow, and serve our community even better. By tracking outcomes and spotting opportunities, we uncover important trends that help us strengthen our work and keep moving our mission forward. Here are some of the findings and highlights from last year’s efforts.

Outreach & Health Programs

The demand for outreach and healthcare services continue to be of importance.



5,429

Clients Served

57,597

Individual Encounters

983

Emergency Room Visits Prevented by our Nurse Practitioners and Volunteer Physicians

\$2.7M

In Public Health Savings

Youth Housing Programs

We offer flexible housing solutions that create pathways to stable housing.



629

Clients Served

15%

Improved Housing

26%

Enrolled in School or were Employed

90%

Of Clients Say They Always or Usually Feel Safe at The Night Ministry

88%

Of Clients are Satisfied with TNM Programs

Volunteers



993

Volunteers

4,088

Hours Volunteered —the Equivalent of 2 Full-Time Employees

Our volunteers include sandwich and meal-making groups, outreach program volunteers, festival and special event volunteers, board and associate members, committee members, and admin/office volunteers.

Food & Supplies



25%

Of Clients Report They Rarely or Never have Enough Food

47,781

Meals were Distributed by our Health Outreach Programs

18,882

Hygiene Kits were Created and Distributed to our Clients

Youth Emergency Shelter (The Crib)



The Crib has seen a continual growth over the past 5 years. We are already on track to see more than **430** youth by the end of this fiscal year.

Clients Served

200

219

246

283

367

FY21

FY22

FY23

FY24

FY25

Data from Fiscal Year 2025 (July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025)

A Legacy of Giving

Bertha DePriest first learned about The Night Ministry more than two decades ago while on vacation in Argentina, in a conversation with a couple she met and is still friends with, Gordon and Paula Addington. The name itself piqued her curiosity, and when she returned home, she encouraged her church to get involved. Soon, her congregation was preparing evening meals and delivering them to The Night Ministry's Health Outreach Bus. This experience opened her eyes to the struggles faced by many unhoused people in Chicago.

A Senior Art Director at Spiegel until her retirement in 2000, Bertha always believed in putting her resources to work where they could make a difference. "Uncle Sam doesn't need more of our money," she often said, reminding others that charitable giving could provide both impact and tax benefits. Living by that principle, she became a donor to The Night Ministry, drawn to the organization's direct and compassionate service.

Becoming a Beacon of Hope felt like a natural next step. As a monthly donor, she appreciates the ease and consistency, knowing her support reliably reaches those who need it.

"You usually end up giving more, and you never forget," she explained with a smile.

Bertha hopes her contributions help expand The Night Ministry's reach, ensuring that more people become aware of and support its vital work. With her twin sister by her side, she recently celebrated her 95th birthday—still filled with the same passion for community, generosity, and faith that first inspired her journey.



Bertha DePriest attended The Night Ministry's Legacy Society Brunch.

Become a Beacon of Hope

Thanks to the recurring contributions from our Beacons of Hope, The Night Ministry can continue to be a light for so many of our unhoused and impoverished neighbors in Chicago. With their steady support, we can put more resources into the life-saving services and programs that many people need to survive.

Save the Date

Giving Tuesday | December 2

This year, your gift will go **TWICE** as far. Thanks to support from The Alvin H. Baum Family Fund, all donations received from December 1 to December 15 will be matched dollar for dollar. That's right! Don't miss the chance to double your impact!

GIVING TUESDAY

You can donate to The Night Ministry in two ways:

Online

Visit thenightministry.org/donate



Mail

Checks and money orders can be sent to our **NEW** P.O. Box address:
The Night Ministry
P.O. Box 737043
Chicago, IL 60673-7043



Please send an email to donations@thenightministry.org if you have questions about your contribution.

Building a Better Life, One Cut at a Time

At 6'4, Seth Hilton stands tall with a warm smile and a funny but important clarification, "No, I'm not related to the Hiltons," he laughs, referring to the family hotel empire. What Seth lacks in inherited wealth, he makes up for in determination, creativity, and an unexpected gift that emerged during one of the most challenging times the world has faced.

Seth, 22, began his journey to The Crib when his desire for independence at 19 led to couch-surfing and then to homelessness. But rather than viewing this as a setback, Seth saw it as a fresh start.

"I didn't see it as the end of something," Seth says. "I saw it as the start of figuring out who I am and what I can do. Every day felt like a chance to build toward something better."

The pandemic brought an unexpected revelation. Unable to visit a barber, Seth decided to cut his own hair and discovered he was a natural.

What started as a necessity became a passion, eventually switching from his studies in architecture to obtaining his professional barber certification.

Now, Seth has transformed his newfound skill into a gift for his fellow Crib residents. Every other Friday, you'll find him offering free haircuts, understanding that sometimes a fresh cut can be the confidence boost someone needs for a job interview or simply to feel better about themselves.

"Getting a haircut can make such a difference," Seth explains.

"There are so many ways it can be empowering for people."



Seth Hilton gives a young man a haircut at The Crib in perpetration for the start of a new job.

With encouragement and support from Anthony Monterroso, The Crib's Manager of Youth Engagement Services, Seth has already taken his first major step toward independence—he has a part-time job and it currently looking for more opportunities as an independent barber. His routine-driven approach keeps him focused on his ultimate goals: to have stable housing, financial security, and one day, open his own barber shop and be able to offer jobs to people who are trying to be better.

"Everyone has something going on in their life," he reflects. "If I can make them smile, for me that's great."

Like his favorite video game, Minecraft, Seth is building his life one block at a time, on his own terms, proving that sometimes the most unexpected path can lead to the most meaningful destination.



Join our Associate Board for the 11th Annual Night Lights Benefit!

An Evening Benefitting the Health Outreach Bus
Marshall's Landing, 222 West Merchandise Mart Plaza
Thursday, October 30, 2025 at 5:30-9:00 pm



\$100 early bird tickets are available until September 30.

Scan the QR code to purchase tickets and for more information



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of Hope.**
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Thank You!



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The Night Ministry is a Chicago-based organization whose mission is to provide human connection, housing support, and health care to members of our community who are unhoused or experiencing poverty.

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