Imagine Your Community Without Police

By Wesley Stewart

On your way home from work, you see a disheveled woman dangerously wandering in the street. You pull over and call 911. The operator informs you that an MHD (Mental Health Department) vehicle is responding to the incident. Within minutes, two field medics trained in mental health, de-escalation, and basic medical care are on the scene. They quickly manage the crisis and begin to help the woman find long-term care. You continue your drive home knowing that she's safe.

At home, your child tells you about one of their classmates. They’ve been falling asleep in class and sometimes wear the same clothes multiple days per week. Sometimes they get into fights after school or have difficulty making or keeping friends, and you suspect there might be problems at home.

After dinner, you call the CC (Community Cohesion) phoneline. An automated message asks you whether you’re from Seattle or other parts of King County, calling for an adult or child, whether your call is about (1) a domestic disturbance, (2) public health concern, (3) housing need, or (4) other. You press (1) and leave a brief message stating your observations, worries, and any details you can remember about the student and where they live. The next morning you receive a text that summarizes your call and informs you a casefile has been created for follow-up.

A few days later, you’re on a walk and you notice a person asking folks for spare change on your phone. On the app you see there is a community farm just a few blocks from your home. You quickly open the NAb-FoodS casefile, and you step away to access the Community Cohesion hub. After giving the person the few dollars you had on you, you see Imagine, continued on page 4.

2020 Virtual Youth Leadership Summit

Despite the challenges of being unable to gather in person because of COVID-19, Mockingbird’s advocates remained passionate and determined to change the systems that impact their peers. Young people from across Washington state came together, virtually, to share their recommendations for reform. Their recommendations included considerations for improved family connections, legal representation for foster youth, and health care resources for those experiencing homelessness. Their voices get us one step closer to transforming foster care and ending youth homelessness.

Reflection Question: How has COVID-19 affected the way you think about advocacy?

“To me, COVID is amplifying the ways our systems currently function — how people who are already pushed down by our systems are being negatively impacted the most. It is really upsetting to see, but also makes it easier to address and do advocacy work around. I think that is because the effect COVID-19 is having is undeniable, and people are starting to care more about the people being oppressed by our systems. Also, people are sort of forced to care because every single person is affected by COVID in one way or another.”

Emily Stochel, Tacoma Chapter

“COVID-19 has highlighted how advocacy isn’t a part-time activity. Even while we are separated, we should stand in solidarity, and fight for equity and justice for all!”

Wesley Stewart, Network Representative

Advocates from the Yakima Chapter explain the need for legal representation for all youth in care in Washington state.

How was your experience different in a virtual format?

“Having our first virtual Summit made me think about this quote from comic Calvin and Hobbes, “I think we dream so we do not have to be apart so long. If we are in each other’s dreams, then we can play together all night.” Summit was stressful, but it was really fun — especially the game night. And I met quite a few people that I hope I can continue to have a relationship with in a friendly way.”

Olivia Drinkwine, Seattle Chapter Leader

What our audience said:

“This [Summit] been amazing as usual. You all always hit the nail on the head and are addressing very practical issues that get in the way of success. I am in support of all the proposals I have heard. Thank you.”

Melinda Giovengo, Executive Director, YouthCare

“We learn so much from you, honor your lived experiences, and are committed to working with you to achieve the objectives you define.”

Jim Bamberger, Director, Office of Civil Legal Aid

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Letter from the Executive Director

The events of this year have forced us to evaluate our values and consider how best to move forward. We are experiencing a national reckoning, a pivotal moment in our history. And within our grasp lies the opportunity for change. At Mockingbird, we know that the best way to create lasting change is to include the voices of those most impacted in the solution. Recently, Mockingbird’s youth advocates came together virtually and shared their vision for reform at our 15th annual Youth Leadership Summit. Even though they could not be together in person, these leaders remained steadfast in their commitment to transforming the systems that impact their peers.

Each Chapter proposal contained themes of community and connection — themes that are especially applicable in a time when most of us are feeling isolated. These feelings of isolation are not new to Mockingbird’s youth people, as they have all experienced foster care and/or homelessness. In this moment, I am struck by how relevant their solutions are especially applicable in a time when most of us are feeling isolated. These feelings of isolation are not new to Mockingbird’s youth people, as they have all experienced foster care and/or homelessness. In this moment, I am struck by how relevant their solutions are.

The recurring economic recessions our country has experienced over the last several decades is the root of this systemic issue. The resulting budgetary cuts have hit disenfranchised communities the hardest. They are disproportionately impacted because community programs that help those in need tend to be eliminated first. Many of these circumstances are outside the scope of law enforcement training and expertise. Often, the needs of a community could be better met by those services that have been cut.

In Community,

Annie Blackledge
Executive Director

The Legacy of Slave Patrols

The Mockingbird Society’s mission is to transform foster care and end youth homelessness. We create, support, and advocate for racially equitable, healthy environments that develop and empower young people at risk of — or who are experiencing — foster care or homelessness. Working in partnership with young people with lived experience, we change policies and perceptions standing between any child and a safe, supportive and stable home. We envision each young person, regardless of race or individual experience, reaching adulthood with a sustainable opportunity to thrive. The Mockingbird Society is a key component of our youth development program, the Mockingbird Youth Network. All youth reporters are paid employees, and contributors from the across the country receive up to $250 for public works. The Times is distributed nationally to more than 20,500 through our mailing list and as an insert in Real Change, a Seattle-based community newspaper. As a nonprofit organization, we appreciate your private contributions to support our youth and family programs. Donate online, by phone, or mail.

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A Never-Ending Cycle

People experiencing homelessness are no strangers to police violence, even here in Seattle. According to The Seattle Times, in the first four months of 2019 Seattle police performed 93 sweeps of homeless camps. That’s nearly one per day. These sweeps usually involve forcibly removing people from the area, arresting them if they don’t comply, and confiscating or outright destroying any items left behind.

For larger camps, police are required to give 72 hours’ notice before they sweep an area, but the majority of these sweeps are performed on smaller encampments, where there is little to no regulation on what the police are allowed to do. Even then, people’s belongings are often separated from them. When you’re homeless, a simple tent and sleeping bag are luxuries, and it’s difficult to replace them.

This is part of a tactic the city of Seattle calls “Clean and Hold,” where the police will “clean” an area of people experiencing homelessness (which implies they are inherently dirty, of course), and then “hold” the area. Holding an area means patrolling it to make sure more people experiencing homelessness don’t show up. If these sound like tactics a military would use to expel foreign invaders to you, you’re not the only one.

Encampments aside, laws are often enforced disproportionately for people experiencing homelessness. For instance, it’s illegal in Seattle to sit on sidewalks in commercial areas, like University Way in the University District. In practice, however, people sit on the sidewalks all the time with no repercussions. But, if they have a large backpack, dirty clothes, or a lot of change, they’ll be taken aside by police, their IDs checked for warrants, and then fined when they can’t pay.

Seattle also has aggressive panhandling laws, that are incredibly open to interpretation by law enforcement. Simply asking someone for change for the bus, depending on what you look like, could get you fined or arrested. This is especially true for black and brown people, who are often coded as being more aggressive. This all adds up in the end. If you have fines you can’t pay, they turn into warrants, and if you get picked up with a warrant, you end up in jail. If you get released, you still have no resources. If you had a job, it has now fallen through. If you have stuff at a shelter somewhere, it’s gone. You start over, and the cycle continues.

Penalizing people for being homeless doesn’t stop them from being homeless. In fact, it does the opposite. If we stop giving people fines they can’t pay or arresting them for sleeping on a bench, and instead connect these people with services and make sure they get the help they need, we can finally start solving the problem and reduce the number of folks who are unhoused. It starts with people standing up for human rights, and taking funding from see Cycle, continued on page 4

History of Policing and Racism

T o this day we are taught that the narrative of Black history is something to be seen as negative. We are taught little about powerful and influential people of color. We were taught to remember the bad things that happened to the Black community. We know about slavery. And how an entire people were oppressed simply because of their darker skin color, ed all over the world because of slavery and oppression.

Sadly, we are not fully aware of Black history outside of these circumstances. Looking back at American history, certain times cause some of us to cringe. Others view those times as evidence that they were somehow better than another ethnicity. Let’s take for example the famous 1861 speech by Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, called the Cornerstone Speech. He declared that the new government was founded on the idea that the white race was superior. In the following decades, there were a great deal of Black politicians, doctors, and leaders. Yet, white Americans did not like the idea of Black people having power. In the “Democrat Handbook,” there was a paragraph that claimed that this country was a white man’s country and should be governed by whites only.

Many scholars describe how the criminal legal system was created to keep people of color, specifically African Americans, oppressed through this avenue of structural racism. This is because they wanted to keep Black people in their place, results in violence against Black people. This is especially true when that violence is enacted by police forces. Somehow, justice is never served equally for those who have suffered at the hands of the government.

Capitalism further complicates these dynamics. While there is an understandabe drive to be successful and live out the “American dream,” we can’t forget that capitalism is built on profiting from the suffering of others. I understand the drive to be successful and live out the American dream, but capitalism is built on profiting from people’s suffering. The court system profits from criminal justice. And criminal justice often plays into the fear, resulting in higher incarceration rates for Black people. It is scary to be a person of color and walk around town with the constant threat of being treated as a criminal because of this ignorance.

There are a lot of reasons why some communities are not doing as well as others. The language that we use to describe neighborhoods is one of those reasons. Neighborhoods and schools are described as ‘good’ when there is an absence of Black people, and ‘bad’ when there is a majority of Black people and other people of color. If we invested in Black communities and stopped using coded racist language to describe them, it would lessen the opportunity gap between communities. The government should be paying more attention to developing communities of poverty, rather than oppressing them. We can do this by defunding the police and prisons, limiting military spending, and managing the salaries of politicians. This money should be more focused on human rights, and taking funding from the criminal justice system and reallocate funds to community solutions informed by those most impacted.

We Welcome Your Work

We welcome submissions of articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or homelessness. If you want to be, or have been, published in the Mockingbird Times visit mockingbirdsoociety.org, call us at (206) 401-2124 or email us at youthprograms@mockingbirdsoicy.org.

Note: Incoming letters to the editor and correspondence to youth under 18 years old should be addressed to the Mockingbird Times and will be opened first by adult editorial staff.

Summit Chapter Proposals

Seattle Chapter:

Topic: Improve homeless youth caseworker retention by reducing paperwork.

Tacoma Chapter:

Topic: Address racial disproportionality and other systemic biases within Child Protective Services with an equity toolkit that includes youth voice.

Olympia & Spokane Chapters:

Topic: Improve family connections for children and youth in foster care through centralization, data collection and virtual visits. This incudes those with siblings placed in other systems.

Everett Chapter:

Topic: Establish an intergovernmental task force to identify the barriers and gaps Native youth face in accessing state services.

Youth Advocates Ending Homelessness:

Topic: Ensure hygiene and wound care resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness after discharge from hospitals and clinics.

Network Representatives:

Topic: Address police brutality by removing power and funding from the criminal justice system and reallocate funds to community solutions informed by those most impacted.

System Reform

Ezra Alem

Alyssa Downing

System Reform Etsa Alem

Mockingbird Times
Youth voice is the voice of change. Their voices speak out against inherently racist policies and demand that we institute meaningful change to all the systems of oppression to Black, Brown, and indigenous communities. They are showing us we are not without agency to change the structure and institutions that govern our lives. They are reminding us that we, the people, are the government.” — Annie Blackledge, Executive Director

Why Advocacy Matters

Imagine, from page 1

The Mockingbird Society is committed to actively creating racial equity and eliminating the negative impact of intersectionality in our work by embodying the changes we want to see.

Race Equity Mission

The Mockingbird Society will define racially equitable partnerships, practices, and processes. Mockingbird has an internal culture dedicated to addressing racial inequity and intersectionality for ourselves and those we serve.

Race Equity Vision

The Mockingbird Society will redefine racially equitable partnerships, practices, and processes. Mockingbird has an internal culture dedicated to addressing racial inequity and intersectionality for ourselves and those we serve.

public computer. It looks like someone has already followed-up, and you're confident everything will be resolved. Another community member offers you a few fresh fruits before you head back home.

The following week, you’re at home watching the news. It’s all good news. You hear petty theft and burglaries are at all-time lows, and that a flu outbreak is right, because our lives are important and worth more than money.

But it is utterly devoted to keeping me alive. Connected to my center are a pair of arms, they aren’t long or strong, but they’re devoted to allowing me to create and carry my life.

Above my center is my face, emotive, free, mine. Devoted to letting me express myself.

Finally there is my brain, Intelligent, creative, hard-working. My brain doesn’t fit in a neat little box, It is devoted to me being me.

Many young people who experience foster care or homelessness never heal from those feelings of abandonment because they are never given the opportunity to do so. I aim to use my personal power to help others that require healing and help them to move on to adulthood successfully.

I recently participated in my first Youth Leadership Summit, where young advocates from across Washington state presented our proposals for reform in the child welfare and homelessness systems. The Olympia and Spokane Chapters focused on mitigating the challenges of in-person visitations with siblings and parents for youth in foster care.

We identified important obstacles such as short visitation times, a lack of support for families with disabilities, uncomfortable visitation environments, and how COVID-19 has impacted family visitations. We proposed administrative changes to improve family visitations and that will help to build family connections.

Without maintaining connections with family while in foster care, a child can feel so abandoned that they will develop coping mechanisms that are maladaptive to their growth. This inhibits the blossoming life we want all young people to have.

When in-person visitation is possible, it is challenging for many young people to get even the bare minimum of one weekly visit with their siblings or parents. To identify the best way to combat these challenges, we are asking the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to collect and evaluate data in order to learn how visitation, race/ethnicity, and age affect the frequency of visitation.

We also addressed for DCYF to provide more support for hard-working social workers by contracting an external organization to assist with organizing family visitations, and to provide a more nurturing visitation environment. As for COVID-19, we understand that social worker availability has been reduced and visitation has been negatively impacted. But we stand firm in our resolve to help youth maintain family connections, and we will work hard to bring about these improvements. I am excited for the changes that are to come and extremely grateful to be part of a team of young leaders advocating for change.