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MinnPost

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Northfield's The Key: Building is closed but homeless youth still getting supplies, meals, support

By [Jim Walsh](#) | 04/21/2020



Executive director Emily Fulton-Foley: "[We're] sending out gift cards to any kid who sends in a picture of them and a little blurb about what The Key represents to them, so that we can try and understand what historically The Key has meant to kids, what it means to kids right now."

For the first time in its 26-year history, **The Key** in Northfield has closed its doors. Run by the **Northfield Union of Youth**, The Key is the longest-running youth-operated homeless youth center in the United States. And while the COVID-19 pandemic has forced The Key to close, the mission of the Northfield Union of Youth remains the same.



Emily Fulton-Foley

“We continue to work with kids on their basic needs,” said Emily Fulton-Foley, executive director of the Northfield Union of Youth. “That is really our number one piece right now. We do meal delivery out to places, and that gives us an opportunity to go out to the places where the kids are living and see for ourselves if there’s additional needs that kids might come forward with, because they don’t know what’s available or because they’re ashamed to ask for it.

“It gives us an opportunity to kind of check in with parents as well and make sure they don’t need different things, and that’s not really what we normally do. We exist just for the kids. But right now it’s such a community effort to make sure that holistically everyone is feeling supported.”

Prior to the closing, The Key provided a wide array of activities for homeless youth in Rice County. Some of that — including a youth-organized twice-weekly virtual book club — has survived during the statewide shutdown.

“We’re continuing to do our Wednesday night meals,” said Fulton-Foley. “The kids are determining which local businesses [to work with]; the ones they feel most supported by throughout the rest of the year. And so we’re spending money within our community to get kids meals. We’re doing about 25 meals on average, with kids coming each Wednesday coming to grab a meal, check in with staff, maybe pick up some additional things like hygiene products.

“We have toilet paper, and every week we make sure that they know they can grab those things. We have an online art contest. We have three youth right now who are trying to run an evaluation online and on our [Instagram page](#).

“They’re sending out gift cards to any kid who sends in a picture of them and a little blurb about what The Key represents to them, so that we can try and understand what historically The Key has meant to kids, what it means to kids right now, and what we might need to change in the future to continue our work.”

With the closure of the building, The Key has remained up and running [via its Facebook page](#) and in any way it can, thanks to the commitment of people like Fulton-Foley, a mother of three who’s juggling her work life with stay-at-home life.

“We’re just responding to whatever needs kids are coming up with, and I’m working fairly closely with the school district right now,” she said. “We’re sending out a lot of gift cards for gas vouchers for kids to get around. We’re really checking in with those young people who have maybe lost their jobs, and we’re helping to fill out unemployment insurance for them.

“We have an online training now available for people who might be interested in becoming hosts in our community for our host home model. We generally have about nine people on our list of available hosts, and with COVID we’ve only got one family who, if proper precautionary measures are taken,

they would consider taking a young person in need. Our capacity for that is substantially diminished and completely understandably so, but that's really kind of the push that we have right now."

Northfield may have the reputation of a small college and arts town, but homeless youth remains a problem here, and everywhere.

"Because we're a small town, people tend to think they know everyone else," said Fulton-Foley. "And they tend to think that because we know everyone in this community that we take care of one another and so — and I say this broadly — I think it's easy for people to say, 'We take care of each other and how well we do and if we're doing this, then it must be the kids' fault.' Right? I really counter back to people and say, 'Homelessness is never an appropriate consequence for anyone, whether it's a child or an adult.'

"Our program is to really listen to what is happening in the kids' world, and to respond to the kids' needs. We can go up to the cities and try and find a place through like [The Link](#), which is a beautiful resource. But our kids' support systems are here. Their friends are here, anyone that they might have is here, and their jobs are here.

"We also tend to in Northfield, because we're this ideal tourist town, have a tendency to ignore the dark sides of it, because people want to continue to publicize us as this [idyllic small] town and I think that's probably something that happens in a lot of places. The thing that makes Northfield so extraordinary to me is that people are acknowledging the dark areas, and when an issue comes up, people are saying, 'OK, how do we fix this?'"

It's been a long time since Foley-Fulton has been at the youth center, as her maternity leave was winding up the week The Key closed. Like the rest of the pandemic work force, she's trying to do her best with what's she's got.

"I'm grateful for the people that I know who care about kids, and I'm grateful for the community, and the social service agencies who really all support one another here, " she said. "I think it's a roller coaster right now, and we are all going through these different patterns of grief and processing and really trying to figure out how we take care of each other, and how we take care of ourselves.

"And the dichotomy of feeling comfort in the fact that I have all of my needs met and feeling fear for the fact that in my job, I need to go out and make sure that people who don't have those same privileges that I have are being taken care of in a way that gives them dignity and gives them safety,



and that's not always easy to do because of how things are right now.

"We're trying to go out and say, 'I see that you have a need, and I'm going to jump ahead and give you a solution to this need.' When really our job is to back up and wait for the kids to come to ask, and then address them. We're trying to get ahead of all that."

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Jim Walsh, a former City Pages music editor and award-winning columnist for the Pioneer Press, writes about music and local culture. He is the author of the oral history "The Replacements: All Over but the Shouting."

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