

Giving Back: Vulnerable Youth Provide Holiday Help for Unhoused People

By Nikki Silverstein | Nov 25, 2025



SHOWING UP Ambassadors of Hope and Opportunity’s youth group, including alumni, meets weekly. Front row, from left, are: Zara Babitzke, James Hayes, Snow (dog) and Nick Petty. Back row, from left, are: Vince Chew, Carly Hernandez, Shanya and Makiaya. Photo by Ambassadors of Hope and Opportunity.

A youth group has decided to forego their annual holiday party to provide pasta meals, socks, warm clothes and more to scores of homeless people in Marin on Thanksgiving eve. Even more remarkable—the young people face their own challenges.

Ranging in age from 16 to 25, the Leadership Youth Team is part of Ambassadors of Hope and Opportunity (AHO), a local nonprofit serving at-risk and homeless teens and young adults. Together with AHO alumni and volunteers, they will prepare 200 pasta meals and care packages and then distribute the goods to homeless camps across Marin.

Stops include Hamilton and Binford Road in Novato and various sites in San Rafael. They won’t just make deliveries to sanctioned encampments. The AHO teens, young adults and alumni have lived experience on the streets and know where homeless people live under the radar.

The idea came from the team, who became concerned about those with food insecurity after the federal government announced its shutdown and loss of SNAP food benefits. Team members recalled their hard times before finding AHO, when they were hungry or struggling. From there, it was an easy decision to trade in their tree-trimming party for a day of offering to others.

“This project just highlights who they are as people,” said Zara Babitzke, AHO’s founder and director. “They want to help other people because they saw how we have helped them, and they want to give back now that they’re stabilized and doing well.”

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cluding newcomers to the program and those with ongoing needs, arily stop after a participant reaches age 26; the agency provides

services when needed.



Services are comprehensive and personalized. Housing, employment and dental needs are the top three reasons that youth have reached out to AHO for the past 22 years. Through a network of more than 200 partners, AHO can help with those needs and much more. Providing medical care, legal aid, trauma counseling, cell phones, laptops, post office boxes and a two-week wardrobe are all in a day's work.

For their part, program participants developed and are guided by AHO's three principles. The first, showing up, means being on time and ready to work, followed by staying in communication and keeping one's word.

Alumni help mentor new people on the program and its principles. Coming from a similar background goes a long way to build trust with a young person let down in the past by adults and mainstream institutions.

To help gain the confidence of a youth reaching out for help, Babitzke answers every phone call and text the same day. And she meets them within 24 to 48 hours in a café to share a meal and listen to what they need.

Makiaya, 21, lived in her unreliable Fiat when she called AHO and first met with Babitzke earlier this year. After that meeting in a local restaurant, Makiaya's life trajectory changed.

"Zara said she could help me get into a shelter, and she did," Makiaya said. "She's my safe haven. Zara gave me back hope."

Babitzke says she created a partnership with Makiaya to help her find a new path. Partnering is an important aspect of the AHO program because Babitzke doesn't believe in case management.

"Youth are not cases, and we're not about to manage them," Babitzke said. "Because our culture is so personalized and immediately supportive, many youth feel like we're the family they never had because we're there for them unconditionally."

The approach has certainly proved successful for Makiaya, who now lives in transitional age youth housing in San Rafael. She even has her own bedroom, a benefit she treasures after her time sleeping in a car and sharing a room with others in a busy shelter.

Part of AHO's Youth Leadership Team, Makiaya helped spearhead the project to feed homeless people on Thanksgiving eve. It wasn't long ago when she worried about where her next meal would come from. And she's excited about giving back.

"I've always shared, even when I didn't have much," she said.

James Hayes, an AHO alumnus, is also eager to distribute the pasta meals, socks, warm clothing and hygiene kits to the homeless community. For him, it's about showing appreciation.

"I owe the world the patience that it's given me," Hayes said. "So now I want to be able to give back. Gratitude is not just taking and saying thank you. Gratitude is giving back."

And Hayes has much to be grateful for, he says. Babitzke started AHO after she met him and learned he was falling through the cracks of the group home system, where he was raised. At 18, a transitional age youth, he was sent out on his own without much preparation. He didn't know how to balance a checkbook or get health care. In short order, he became homeless.

"I just didn't have any life skills, you know, things that your parents would normally teach you," Hayes said.

Babitzke was about to teach him those skills when the nonprofit program she worked for in San Rafael lost its government funding. Not able to abandon Hayes and other similarly situated youths, she scraped together non-government funding to launch AHO. Hayes was her first participant.

For several years, AHO provided services to help support him. When he had a terrible toothache, Babitzke helped him see a dentist for a tooth extraction—entirely at no charge.

Today, at age 42, Hayes is a father and has his own home in Petaluma. He also remains very active with AHO, participating with the Youth Leadership Team, sharing his experiences and helping support their projects.

How AHO helped him move past his trauma and obstacles remains top of mind. It was, he says, a monumental endeavor that Babitzke and AHO undertook with him. And they have done so for thousands of other young people, with the support of community partners, volunteers and alumni like Hayes.

On Thanksgiving eve, some of those youth will be giving back by nurturing homeless people with a meal and care package. It's all part of AHO's culture and principles.

"We're basically wanting to show our love and caring for people by doing this," Babitzke said.