

412 Youth Zone continues to support, engage local youth

In March 2016, the 412 Youth Zone opened its doors and began operating as a one-stop drop-in center for young adults ages 18 to 23 who are eligible for Independent Living services or are experiencing homelessness. Now, nearly two years later, the Youth Zone continues to grow and expand in its efforts to best meet the needs of local youth.

412 Youth Zone staff members, who serve approximately 60-75 youth each day, have been working with program participants to explore ways to make the facility more engaging and impactful. One popular idea was a space where participants could complete homework, relax or create artwork without disruption.

“Our lounge can get quite loud, and our youth really wanted a place that was a little calmer and more relaxed,” said Aimee Plowman, director of the 412 Youth Zone. “We turned a room that wasn’t used often into a quiet space. The Quiet Space is used daily by many of our youth, and gives them the opportunity to step away from the larger group and interact in a space with fewer distractions.”

Another idea with strong participant support was a music studio.

“We had a room that was designed for youth to meet with representatives from various community agencies, but we realized very quickly that our youth didn’t want to meet in that designated area. We thought it would be interesting to convert the space into a music studio where students could record and produce music,” Aimee said. “The youth have been involved in all aspects of planning the studio – from finding a name to creating studio rules to designing the artwork that will go on the studio walls. It’s a space that the youth fully own and are excited to begin using.”

In addition to changes with the physical space, the 412 Youth Zone has been working to bring in a variety of programs and opportunities.

Through a partnership with Bike Pittsburgh, youth can take six hours of bike safety training to learn appropriate use of bike lanes, signaling, the importance of staying hydrated, and bike maintenance and upkeep. This training is particularly useful as some youth have never ridden a bike before and would not be able to do so without the class. After successfully completing the program, youth receive a helmet, lock, bike light, accessories and a bike of their own.

A new partnership with the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust exposes 412 Youth Zone participants to the various roles needed to make a musical a success – such as actors; set, lighting, and costume designers; and directors – and allows the youth to try out these roles in a series of workshops. The program culminates with tickets to see a performance and receive a backstage tour of the theatre.

The 412 Youth Zone has also begun offering part-time positions to participants, including office assistants, housekeeping, donation coordinators, and kitchen/cleaning staff. Youth interested in these roles fill out an application and go through an interview process. Once selected, they work part-time and gain experience as well as income.

“We’ve really been exploring a variety of options to meet our youths’ needs, whether it is improving our spaces; offering unique programming; or taking youth out for community activities like escape rooms, kayaking, or fishing. Each opportunity we offer not only provides enrichment, but also teaches soft skills

like teamwork and communication,” Aimee continued. “Our youth are working hard to be successful, independent adults, and we are happy to do anything we can to help them meet those goals.”