

Indiana Episcopalians open state's first LGBTQ youth shelter

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Trinity Haven's executive director Jenni White (center) cuts the ribbon to officially open Indiana's first shelter for LGBTQ youth on April 30. (Photo by Tracey Lemon)

Even before the ribbon was cut to officially open Trinity Haven—Indiana's first residential facility for LGBTQ youth and young adults who are at risk of homelessness—on April 30, two people were living in the house.

“As soon as we announced our opening date, young people began contacting Trinity Haven,” said Leigh Ann Hirschman, a member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Indianapolis and the founding president of Trinity Haven's board of directors. They knew they would be imminently homeless, she continued, making the real need for such a shelter all the more obvious.

Trinity Haven offers a transitional living program, which provides up to 24 months of housing, in addition to stabilization assistance, case management, and care coordination for residents ages 16–21. It also offers a host homes program, which provides an average of six months of housing with a host family and intensive case

management for people age 16–24.

Trinity Haven's road from idea to reality began in 2016 when Trinity's new rector, Julia Whitworth, convened a discernment committee to determine the best use of an empty house the parish owned.

"In the course of that work we learned that LGBTQ youth homelessness is an invisible crisis in Indianapolis," Hirschman said. "Forty percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. Sixty-eight percent say that family rejection of their gender identity or sexual orientation is a major reason that they are homeless."

Whitworth recalled that when the committee brought the possibility of opening a home for LGBTQ youth to the parish in 2017, they "barely batted an eye in saying this was the thing to do."

When it became clear that Trinity could not use the house it owned for the project, the parish provided a \$500,000 loan and \$50,000 in donations to purchase another house nearby. Over time, parishioners contributed an additional \$200,000. The project also received grants from Impact 100 of Greater Indianapolis and the United Thank Offering.

The Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis assisted by naming Trinity Haven a cooperating ministry. The designation allows Trinity Haven to purchase staff health insurance and other benefits through the diocese. Other local Episcopal parishes also provided support and leadership.

"This is unfortunately a huge need in our community, and as an openly gay married White male, I realize that my life might have been very different had I come out in my adolescent years," said Jeff Bower, the associate rector for stewardship and community engagement at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, who also serves on the Trinity Haven board.

"Now I'm 60 years old, but had I come out at the time that I was 15, 16, 17, I'm not quite sure that I wouldn't need a place like Trinity Haven. So, it's been one of my passions to be a voice and an advocate for youth to have a safe place and environment where they can grow and flourish and really be able to advocate for themselves. That's what Trinity Haven is about: allowing kids to live into full potential as loved by God, and to shape a different narrative."

Hirschman emphasized that although Trinity Haven is closely related to Trinity Church, the facility is not itself religious.

“It is important that these young people understand there are no religious requirements—because unfortunately, so many of them have experienced mistreatment in the name of religion,” she said.

Whitworth hopes Trinity Haven can be a model for other churches.

“I have had a dream from the get-go that we could create a model that’s replicable for other churches in other parts of the country,” she said. “We have learned so much, and once this is thriving in the way that we imagine it will be, we hope that the story of Trinity Haven can be an inspiring one for other parishes who are looking to use their properties in a way that is life-giving for their communities.” —Episcopal News Service