

JABALI YOUTH ADVOCACY

AT HOMELESS CHILDREN'S NETWORK:

Findings from July 2024 to June 2025



HOMELESS CHILDREN'S
NETWORK

This report was prepared by Indigo Cultural Center as part of an independent evaluation of the Jabali Youth Advocacy Program. The perspectives and interpretations presented here are those of the evaluators and are not intended to represent the official views of Homeless Children's Network.

Detailed information about Indigo Cultural Center, Homeless Children's Network, Jabali Youth Advocacy, and the literature guiding this report are available at the end of this report in the section, Background and Context.

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Introduction

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the Jabali Youth Advocacy program at the Homeless Children's Network (HCN). Through a critical partnership with San Francisco's Department of Children, Youth and their Families (DCYF), HCN has implemented the first year of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program, a youth-led advocacy committee that amplifies the voices of youth around substance abuse and prevention. Jabali Youth Advocacy is a culturally-responsive, trauma-informed youth development program model that takes the following into account:

- the complex relationship between poor mental health and substance use;
- Black/African-American experiences with the failed War on Drugs; and,
- prevailing community norms for treatment options.

Youth empowerment, leadership, and civic engagement are the core of this model in helping youth to succeed in school, work, and adulthood. Through weekly youth meetings, educational sessions, thought-provoking discussions, shared learning, group activities, and real-world examples, youth are supported to reflect on their lived experiences, hone their own stories, build messaging platforms, advocate for a youth voice in the conversation, and take action in addressing substance use in San Francisco. This initiative aims to create impactful youth-driven messaging and campaigns to address substance use within the communities of Jabali youth leaders.

Jabali Youth Advocacy's Contracted Performance Objectives: FY 2024-2025

The Jabali Youth Advocacy Program met its goals of serving and engaging youth participants in developing personal and professional skills for community advocacy and collaborating on solutions to the SUD crisis.

Objective	Actual	Status
10 High School students enroll in the program.	10 high school students enrolled.	Objective Exceeded
Team participates in Program Quality Assessment (PQA) process.	Participated in PQA Process.	Objective Met
Team participates in training for social-emotional learnings (SEL) and practices.	Participated in SEL trainings.	Objective Met
Team identifies a plan for incorporating SEL learnings into program.	Team identified plan for incorporating SEL learnings into program.	Objective Met
75%+ of surveyed report having a caring adult in the program.	100% surveyed report having a caring adult in the program.	Objective Exceeded
75%+ surveyed report increased engagement in school and community.	100% surveyed report increased engagement in school and community.	Objective Exceeded
75%+ surveyed report involvement in program implementation/ leadership opportunities.	100% surveyed reported involvement in program implementation/ leadership opportunities.	Objective Exceeded
Fiscal health of the agency remains STRONG.	Fiscal health of agency was STRONG.	Objective Met

For more information about the program's performance metrics see the table on page 4.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS AND PARTICIPANTS

Together, with HCN, Indigo Cultural Center evaluated the impact of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program this school year. In line with a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) rooted in racial equity, HCN staff, including the HCN Jabali Youth Advocacy team, collaborated with the Indigo Cultural Center team on evaluation design, survey development, data collection, and the interpretation of quantitative and qualitative findings.

The current evaluation explored the experience of the HCN Jabali Youth Advocacy for high school youth in San Francisco during the school year. The evaluation focused on experiences across **four key components emphasized within the Jabali Youth Advocacy Program:**

- Building connections
- Developing skills and career readiness
- Empowering leadership and advocacy
- Increasing community awareness and impact

During the school year, from August 2024 to May 2025, the Jabali Youth Advocacy team engaged 10 high school students attending a public school in San Francisco. On the final day of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program, four (4) students engaged in the evaluation survey regarding their experience in the program.

Survey participants' ages ranged from 15-16. Half of the evaluation

participants identified as female and half identified as male. Of the four (4) survey respondents, three were in 10th grade, and one was in 11th grade. All evaluation participants identified as Black/African American.

Though we believe that the survey sample of participants are representative of the overall youth served, it is possible that this sample of youth had a unique experience in the program. However, we engaged in sessions with the HCN Jabali Youth Advocacy team where we continuously confirmed that evaluation findings were aligned with staff's experiences, perceptions, and awareness of all youth participant's experiences.

Additionally, we utilize administrative data to track performance metric service goals and objectives.



JYA Program Coordinator and JYA youth participants at BBHI's Open House.

Evaluation Findings



THE JABALI YOUTH ADVOCACY PROGRAM EXCEEDED PERFORMANCE METRICS

The Jabali Youth Advocacy program's service goals were exceeded for the number of youth participants who enrolled in and completed the program. Service goals for engagement in key training, developing trusting relationships with adults in the program, and engaging in leadership and community advocacy efforts were exceeded. The table below provides additional information on these metrics:

Jabali Youth Advocacy Program Performance Objectives			
Performance Objective	Goal	Achieved	% Goal Achieved
Number of participants	10 participants	10 participants	100%
Number of participants successfully completed program	9 participants	10 participants	111%
Participants engage in Social-Emotional learning trainings	10 participants	10 participants	100%
Participants utilize Social-Emotional learning in their programs and practice	100%	100%	100%
Participants report having a caring adult in the program	75%	100%	133%
Participants report being more engaged in their school or community	75%	100%	133%
Participants report involvement in program implementation and leadership opportunities	75%	100%	133%
Fiscal health of grantee agency based on DCYF's Fiscal and Compliance Monitoring efforts.	Strong	Strong	Achieved



YOUTH BUILT CULTURALLY AFFIRMING CONNECTIONS

An important component of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program is the opportunity for students to make connections with both their peers and adults. In order for youth to have meaningful, open, and honest discussions about what they see happening in their communities, it was important that youth felt that they could connect with and trust their program peers and staff. **This connection and trust was built when:**

- Having a program coordinator who had expertise working within the community, knowledge with substance use disorder, experience providing culturally affirming programs, and shared cultural congruence with the youth. **100% of Jabali Youth Advocacy felt supported by and connected to the Program Coordinator.**
- Participants could work closely with peers to whom they related to, and together, determine what needs had to be addressed within their community. **100% of participants felt more connected to their peers through the program.**

Another key component of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program was **helping youth feel a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and authenticity.** This occurred through the program's creation of spaces where participants' racialized lived experiences could be acknowledged, explored, and



HCN's Program Director in Africentric Programs, JYA Program Coordinator and JYA youth at the youth's final presentation.

affirmed. The shared racial identity of all participants was found to play a critical role in cultivating an inclusive and culturally responsive environment, allowing participants to relate to one another on a deeper level—free from the burden of code-switching, judgment, or the need to navigate harmful stereotypes.

"[I did not feel] left out." - Jabali Youth Advocacy participant

"It feels comfortable and gives me something to talk about with [the other participants] to connect on a different level." - Jabali Youth Advocacy participant

"It feels good and I can connect with them easier." - Jabali Youth Advocacy participant

These reflections underscore the essential role that inclusive, identity-affirming spaces play in youth development—they provide a rare and powerful space for connection, healing, and the freedom to grow without barriers.



JYA youth at K-1 Speed.

YOUTH DEVELOPED SKILLS AND CAREER READINESS

The Jabali Youth Advocacy Program offered participants meaningful opportunities to develop essential skills that support both leadership growth and future career success. Through hands-on involvement in initiatives such as HCN's Jabali Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Awareness Campaign and various student-led awareness projects—such as advocacy through streetwear and creating posters to spread community awareness of SUD—**youth participants gained valuable experience in collaboration, communication, and project execution.** These opportunities not only strengthened their teamwork skills but also instilled a **lasting sense of confidence** in their ability to develop and deliver successful initiatives.

Indeed, youth reported the **greatest growth in the following skill areas:**



Public speaking



Ability to work in groups



Supporting one's mental health



Interviewing



Leadership and workforce development

In addition, the Jabali Youth Advocacy Program increased youth confidence across multiple areas related to public speaking and personal achievement – and the results are unanimous! This boost in confidence reflects the powerful impact of the program and highlights its potential to foster ongoing youth engagement in advocacy, leadership, and community-driven change.

- **100%** felt more confident when speaking in front of others
- **100%** felt more confident sharing their ideas with others
- **100%** felt more confident sharing their knowledge with others
- **100%** helped them feel more confident collaborating with people they don't know
- **100%** felt more confident in what they can achieve

YOUTH WERE EMPOWERED TO ENGAGE IN LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY

The student-led approach of the Jabali Youth Advocacy Program was critical in helping youth understand how to effect meaningful change within their communities and strengthened their belief in their power to lead change. Youth were empowered to take full ownership of the program's direction and design and implement the activities. Youth reported the following positive impacts to their sense of leadership and advocacy:



Participants agreed the program helped them **identify ways to make positive change** in their community.



Participants felt **more aware of issues** going on in their community.



Participants felt **inspired to take action** towards positive change in their community.



Participants felt **confident in their ability to make positive change** in their community.

“

I've learned [about taking] accountability, action, and taking responsibility for my actions [in my community]"

- Youth Participant

”

YOUTH COMMUNITY AWARENESS AND IMPACT INCREASED

The Jabali Youth Advocacy Program increased youth awareness, strengthened youth's sense of responsibility, and contributed to a collective commitment to positive change. Youth shared that the program not only helped them better understand the needs of their community but also motivated them to take action to improve it. Experiences in the program left students not only inspired but also equipped and motivated to continue making meaningful contributions to their communities.

"Brings awareness [to my community]"

"[Doing] better in the community"

"[The program] helped people"

Implications



JYA youth at the 2025 American Thoracic Society Conference.

Findings from this study emphasize the importance of HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy program in uplifting youth voices and empowering youth to make positive change within their communities. Particularly, the Jabali Youth Advocacy program promoted participants' ability to build connections with trusted adults and their peers. Moreover, students developed highly transferrable and crucial skills for public speaking, their future careers, and for leadership and continued advocacy efforts. Based on the findings from this study, there are several implications for both policy and practice.

First, **extended funding is essential for the continued growth and expansion of the Jabali Youth Advocacy program.** Findings revealed the program promoted confident, socially aware, and action-oriented youth who are committed to

addressing a long-standing issue within the San Francisco community—substance use disorder. In addition, continued investment, as well as expanded investment, in the Jabali Youth Advocacy program means an opportunity to deepen and scale a successful model that empowers young leaders in San Francisco, strengthen communities, and drive meaningful change on an urgent public health issue—substance use disorder.

Second, **the Jabali Youth Advocacy program should be looked to as a model for other organizations seeking to target SUD within communities.** Specific attention should be paid to Jabali Youth Advocacy's focus on providing culturally congruent and affirming spaces and staffing as key mechanisms of change.

Conclusion

It is critical to uplift youth and value their voices as essential stakeholders in our communities to promote community engagement, positive youth development, and nurture the next generation of leaders. The Jabali Youth Advocacy program uplifted youth voices and empowered youth to make positive change within their communities, specifically around substance use disorder, by giving them the skills necessary to take action. More than addressing substance use disorder, the Jabali Youth Advocacy program empowers youth to become agents of change. Through mentorship and skill building, participants gain confidence, tools, and leadership abilities to advocate for their communities AND themselves. This program equips youth with lifelong personal and professional skills that extend far beyond the program. Investing in programs like Jabali Youth Advocacy is an investment in youth empowerment, in fueling solutions to the substance use crisis in San Francisco, and in the long-term health and resilience of our communities!



Background and Context Supplementary Materials

Literature Guiding this Evaluation Report

Substance use disorder as a public health crisis remains prevalent among youth of color who identify as sexual and gender minorities, presenting with earlier ages of substance initiation, increased rates of substance use, and increased rates of substance misuse (Mereish, 2019). Among high school students in San Francisco, 2017 data suggests that 25.65% of students reported marijuana usage, 10.98% of students reported unauthorized pain medication usage, and 10.15% reported use of other drugs, including methamphetamines, inhalants, ecstasy, and cocaine (SFHIP, 2017). Youth of color face significant service gaps when seeking access to interventions that offer SUD and overdose education as a result of various socioeconomic factors (e.g., geographic proximity to SUD interventions, decreased opportunity to be positively identified as in need of an SUD intervention) (Porche et al., 2022). Substance use at an early age can also contribute to adverse risk-taking behaviors that impact socioeconomic outcomes.

Research suggests that youth discussing their experiences with SUD (proximal and/or distal), and the lived or observed accompanying challenges, plays a significant role in the prevention and early intervention of SUD among youth and their peers (Paquette et al., 2019). Additionally, research on youth participatory action, an equity-focused substance prevention intervention designed to elevate youth's expertise in the promotion of adolescent health and well-being, demonstrates its potential to provide youth with a platform to develop personal and communal consciousness around community difficulties such as youth substance abuse while nurturing their respective leadership and advocacy skills (Valdez et al., 2022). Research on its effectiveness is growing, with additional room for knowledge around proximal outcomes and long-term effectiveness of this intervention (Valdez et al., 2022).

Key References

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Indigo Cultural Center

A Note About the Agency and People Conducting this Evaluation

Indigo Cultural Center (a predominantly BIPOC- staffed organization) is led by executive director Dr. Eva Marie Shivers, who identifies as a bi-racial African American, cisgender woman. The Institute of Child Development Research and Social Change at Indigo Cultural Center is an action-research firm that specializes in infant and early childhood research and evaluation conducted with an anti-racist lens. The Institute is led by director Dr. Jayley Janssen, who identifies as a white, cisgender woman. The evaluation of HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy Program was led by Ronae Matriano, a Filipina woman and a small team that consisted of a Black multiracial woman, two Black bi-racial women, a Black woman, and a white woman.

Indigo Cultural Center's mission is to conduct rigorous policy-relevant research on mental health, education, and development by partnering with community agencies and public agencies that are dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and families in BIPOC communities. Since its inception, Indigo Cultural Center has employed the use of community-based participatory research in all our evaluations. What this means is that we use a collaborative model and working style that involves our clients – who we prefer to call 'partners' – in the planning, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination processes of evaluation. We recognize the strengths that our partners bring to each evaluation project, and we build on those assets by consulting with our partners initially and at key milestones throughout the project, integrating their input and knowledge into all aspects of the project, asking for feedback on a regular basis, and seeking consensus on key issues and outcomes.

Our Voice and Terminology used in this Report

Our evaluation team employs the use of feminist methodology and the use of first-person voice when writing reports (e.g., 'we', 'us'; Leggat-Cook, 2010; Mitchel, 2017). Throughout this report, we use the terms Black and African American interchangeably. We use LGBTQIA+ as an acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual" with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of our community. We use queer to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. We use gender rather than sex as an inclusive term that acknowledges that gender is socially and contextually constructed and is a multidimensional facet of identity.

Homeless Children's Network

Homeless Children's Network History

HCN's trusted provider status among historically marginalized communities in San Francisco is built on 33 years of innovative, relationship-based, and culturally responsive approaches to program development, community outreach and engagement, service delivery, and evaluation. Our culturally responsive programs, citywide partnerships, and visionary leadership deliver services to 2,500+ community members annually at no cost to youth and their families. As a city leader in programming development and delivery, HCN is dedicated to advancing systemic equity and reaching the most underserved youth, families, and communities that remain overlooked and marginalized by many systems of support including mainstream philanthropic agencies. HCN offers extensive services providing San Francisco's historically marginalized youth, families, adults, and communities with the tools, resources, and support needed to navigate complex systems and overcome challenges through collaborative efforts.

Three decades ago, leaders from six shelters recognized a critical gap in services for San Francisco families experiencing homelessness. These organizations provided emergency shelter, domestic violence assistance, and transitional housing, but because of their structure, they could only serve families for a short time. This limited period of care created cycles of attachment and loss—youth and families would build relationships with staff, only to be uprooted again. This instability made it hard for families to remain open to accessing support. In 1992, the community came together to break this cycle. They founded HCN to provide families in crisis with a lasting source of connection and care. Over the next three decades, in close collaboration and communication with our community members, community stakeholders, and community partners, HCN has evolved into an organization that directly addresses inclusion, community empowerment, and systemic equity.

What began as a network of six shelters has now grown to a vibrant hub of an HCN Collaborative of 60+ service agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) serving the hardest-to-reach youth and families, including those with experiences of or at risk for homelessness and violence. HCN's robust Collaborative network includes Childcare and Education Centers; San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) schools; primary care; LGBTQIA+ services; substance use treatment; transitional housing and shelters; Family Resource Centers; permanent supportive housing; foster care, and others. HCN is positioned in every San Francisco neighborhood and has worked with SFUSD providing onsite and mobile case management and mental health and wellness services for students and their families since 1997. The organization has HCN therapists onsite in 20+ SFUSD schools and working throughout the community, and provides Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS) via an MOU with SFUSD.

Homeless Children's Network (continued)

Homeless Children's Network's Programming and Approaches

HCN welcomes and affirms everyone, while engaging an Afri-centric lens to address the historical legacy of intergenerational racism, inequity, and trauma. HCN's Afri-centric approach is a way of embracing ALL historically marginalized communities based on community-defined evidence based practices, which include: affirmation of cultural inclusion, trauma- and love-informed practices, self-acceptance and resilience focuses, identification of clients' unique strengths and normalization of their experiences, reframing of mental health stigma, acknowledgement of a range of spiritual practices, family and community member integration into services, collective grief processing, fear without judgement, and addressing resource and basic-need access barriers.

The heart of HCN's Afri-centric approach lies in holding space for cultural rhythm and nuance while creating a sense of home—a safe, culturally grounded space where people can fully express themselves and be seen without judgment. HCN's programs and services provide SF's most marginalized children, families, providers, and communities with the tools, resources, and support needed to navigate complex systems and overcome challenges through collaborative efforts. The seven cardinal values of HCN's Ma'at Program model are our core values: 1) Balance, 2) Order, 3) Righteousness, 4) Harmony, 5) Justice, 6) Truth, and 7) Reciprocity. This approach is unapologetically culturally affirming, soul-inspiring, and grounded in a shared commitment to holistic wellness and Ma'at's seven cardinal values.

Over the past several years, there has been a call to decolonize the field of mental health. One important way to achieve this is by expanding the construct of wellness to include a more explicit focus on community mental health in marginalized communities. It is increasingly important that we avoid reinforcing mainstream narratives that pathologize our communities by failing to recognize the broader systemic forces affecting the well-being of those who have experienced historical and ongoing marginalization and oppression. Community-based programs designed to promote healing, wellness, and positive mental health do not simply unfold in isolation. Homeless Children's Network's vision embodies emergent work that always reflects the time and space in which it is happening.

HCN's approach to youth community mental health places the youth at the helm of program curriculum, acknowledging youth as the experts of their reality and affirming youth's cultural and communal perspectives within the larger community context. Indeed, a more universal philosophy encourages the tenets of Ubuntu - "I am what I am because of who we all are" - and teaches us that "all things have an impact on each other, and this interconnectedness and interplay is universal" (Marumo & Chakale, 2018).

HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy Program

HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy (JYA) program is a youth-led committee that amplifies the voices of youth around substance abuse and prevention. JYA's culturally-responsive, trauma-informed program model takes the following into account: the complex relationship between poor mental health and substance use; Black/African-American experiences with the failed War on Drugs; and, prevailing community norms for treatment options.

In its first year, JYA youth leaders, aged 14-17, met weekly with HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy Program Coordinator for educational sessions in which youth explored historical understandings of Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and its detrimental impacts and SUD and intersections with racial and social justice issues, while also developing civic engagement skills such as advocacy, public-speaking, and self-confidence.

The Jabali Youth Advocacy program encouraged youth to consider the realities and harms of substance use in their social, virtual, and personal environments. The Youth Advocacy Program Coordinator guided the youth to understand the systemic and economic implications of their experiences and generational experiences. HCN's staff emboldened the youth to think collaboratively on initiatives that could alleviate the traumatic patterns of systemic injustices they have lived and/or witnessed while supporting the youth in sometimes difficult conversations prompted by the unfortunate realities of substance use amongst their peers, families, and communities.

Additionally, the Jabali Youth Advocacy Program provided a space for youth to explore and understand the nuances behind substance use on an emotional, mental, physical, and societal level. Youth were challenged to critically think about the pervasiveness of substance use in mainstream media, amongst peers, and within their communities, and were encouraged to sit with and tolerate the tension of exploration beyond surface-level observations and emotions.

Youth voices and opinions were at the center of the organization and governance of the JYA Committee; participants dictated the design and direction of weekly meetings. Jabali Youth Advocacy staff firmly enforced the concept that the integrity of the program's offerings were informed by those who are currently/have experienced substance use, firsthand or secondhand, offering youth a sense of ownership as a stakeholder in the program.

Based on youth's personal experiences and interests, JYA participants collectively combined fashion and education to create and disseminate a clothing line as a tool for community advocacy. Youth designed and produced a slogan for the apparel

HCN's Jabali Youth Advocacy Program (continued)

("Legacy"), encouraging the creation of a safer, drug-free society for youth and the broader community in San Francisco. Youth landed on this tool for advocacy as it is both visible and accessible while ensuring that the message around drug prevention and community empowerment reaches a wide audience; youth viewed this as an opportunity to spark conversations and encourage their peers to take a stand against substance use.

Additionally, youth created canvas artwork and presentations for their Campaign Awareness project.

Additionally, youth lent their voices to HCN's Jabali SUD Awareness and Education Campaign via participation in a digital media campaign receiving over a million views and reaching over 390,000 people between January to March 2025. Youth shared their perspectives on the impact and harms of substance use, further amplifying youth experiences to a range of audiences within San Francisco.

Throughout the year, these activities and opportunities for engagement strengthened youth self-confidence as they transition into adulthood while reaffirming the importance of community healing in the face of social and health inequities. The focus of the JYA Committee was substance abuse and prevention, but, social and emotional skills and internal insight gained along the way will transcend all facets of their lives and prepare the next generation of systemic change-makers, who not only show up for themselves but also show up for their community.

JABALI YOUTH ADVOCACY CORE PROGRAM ACTIVITIES:

- **1-on-1 reflective sessions with JYA program coordinator**
- **Weekly educational sessions & roundtable discussions**
 - **Topics included:**
 - **Youth civic engagement**
 - **Substance Use Awareness, including predictive factors**
- **Collaboration with Jabali SUD Awareness campaign to produce YouTube videos**
- **Student-led SUD Awareness project**
 - **Advocacy through streetwear.** Youth created the logo/slogan for customized sweatshirts, sweatpants, tote bags, and beanies. Youth presented about the intentionality behind their awareness project and reflected on their time in the JYA program.
 - **Awareness and resource posters to share essential resources, guidance, and motivational words for individuals and families affected by substance use**
- **Community engagement:** Youth networked with medical professionals at the American Thoracic Society Annual Conference in San Francisco in May 2025.

Gratitude

We express deep gratitude to the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and their Families (DCYF) whose generous funding made this evaluation possible.

Thank you to the Jabali Youth Advocacy participants who shared their experiences and perspectives with us to use as data.

Thank you to the HCN staff, including Dr. April Y. Silas, Dr. Kenneth Kim, Cameron Smith, Diontae Burden, Sarah Griffiths, Daniella Severs, and Sara Ferree who supported the design, implementation, and interpretation of this evaluation. Your thoughtful insights, dedication to the process, and genuine belief in our approach have been deeply appreciated.

Thank you to our amazing Indigo Cultural Center team for their assistance and amazing attention to detail in gathering, entering, managing and analyzing various aspects of the vast amounts of data for this evaluation. And for all the administrative and emotional support required to move this work to completion.

