

Innovation: Phoenix Hall

Terrance Lindsey knew some of his fellow classmates at North Lawndale College Prep High School (NLCP) on Chicago's West Side were homeless and struggling to find a place to lay their heads at night. But then his own mother lost her home at the start of his senior year, and the situation became personal.

"I had to stay with relatives," and his mom went to stay with a friend, the 18-year-old said. "It was hard for me in having to separate from my mom."

"People never knew ... because I never showed it," said Lindsey, who just graduated from NLCP and will attend Michigan State University in the fall. "Sometimes you'll never know that a student is homeless."

The stigma, and even the lack of understanding about homelessness among students, is changing, however. That's due, in part, to the innovative work of The Night Ministry and a collaboration of other social service and non-profit agencies who've been working in the school and the neighborhood for two years under the auspices of The North Lawndale Student Housing Initiative.

The result: Phoenix Hall, a transitional residence located *in* North Lawndale *for* North Lawndale students. When it opens shortly it will house up to eight students who not only will have a place to live, but also a wide array of supports such as tutoring and wellness activities.

The North Lawndale Student Housing Initiative includes The Night Ministry, Old St. Patrick's Church and Empower to Succeed, Youth Outreach Services, and North Lawndale College Prep. Each organization has played - and will continue to play - an integral role in Phoenix Hall, with The Night Ministry building upon its strength in the area of youth housing. Phoenix Hall is the agency's fifth youth housing space.

One of the most innovative parts of the initiative has been the inclusion of students in the development and creation of Phoenix Hall. Facilitators of the project invited students to participate via the North Lawndale Student Housing Council, which met regularly for learning and sharing.

At first, Lindsey joked, he went to council meetings for the free pizza. But then "we got really deep" into what homelessness is and how things can change for students at NLCP. Eventually, he knew he needed to remain involved so his peers would fully understand homelessness and how to combat it.

Among other things, Lindsey and other NLCP students informed their peers throughout the school about the residence, and even helped name Phoenix Hall, which is patterned after a university-style residence hall.

"Most of the (young) people are really excited for the grand opening," Lindsey said. Phoenix Hall provides a safe alternative to staying on couches and doubling-up in homes, which is "just insane," he said.

Phoenix Hall is proof for homeless students that, "people really care about you and want you to succeed," he said. "You are not alone!"