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TOP STORY

College students studying poverty in Charleston find city full of hope

By Amelia Ferrell Knisely Staff writer [July 21, 2019](#)



Keaira Williams and Deajha Baskin stand at the YWCA Shanklin Center for Senior Enrichment in Charleston. The college students are part of an internship program that brings college students to work with people experiencing poverty.

AMELIA FERRELL KNISELY | Gazette-Mail

College students from across the country are in Charleston this summer to help people experiencing some of life's most difficult situations: homelessness, domestic violence, and lack of legal representation and health care.

Yet, after weeks of meeting the city's most vulnerable residents, they see the city as a hopeful place home to dedicated people trying to make it better.

"Despite all the bad things that have happened in Charleston, people are really loyal to their community. They love West Virginia," said Scott Perkins, a neuroscience student at the College of Wooster in Ohio. He is working at the CAMC Ryan White HIV Program.

Perkins and nine other young adults were sent to Charleston through a summer internship program, [Shepherd Higher Education Consortium on Poverty](#), or SHECP, that provides more than 100 college students the opportunity to study and work in distressed areas with high concentrations of poverty.

Students participating in SHECP, a nonprofit that began in 1998 in Virginia, are enrolled at 26 universities that offer courses in poverty studies.

"If you're working in a shelter system, you're working with people who want to be treated with dignity and respect. It takes a special person to make the grade," Brett Morash, SHECP executive director, explained. "They go through a number of vetting processes, [then] they have to interview with the provider to make sure it's a nice match."

In Charleston, students are working with organizations including Food Insecurity in Appalachia, Covenant House homeless day shelter, Trinity Table outreach ministry and West Virginia Health Right.

The students have cooked meals for people experiencing homelessness, answered calls on a local domestic violence crisis line, interviewed people in the South Central Regional Jail who are in need of legal services and more.

"For me the most eye-opening part has been interacting directly with the people we're trying to serve," Perkins said. He has assisted in HIV testing at CAMC and in a mobile clinic that goes into rural Southern West Virginia. "A lot of times people who are struggling with addiction or mental illness tend to be villainized by society. That's really tragic."

Katie Daly is a pre-med student at Washington and Lee University, in Virginia, who is working in social services at CAMC Memorial Hospital.

"I'm working with a lot with patients who are HIV drug users or homeless. I think it would surprise people how much you have in common with them. It can affect everyone or anyone," she said.

The YWCA Charleston hosted three interns this summer working with women and families who have become homeless due to domestic violence, elder abuse, disabilities and more.

Jennifer Goddard, chief program officer for the YWCA Charleston, said the internship program is valuable to nonprofits that have limited funds to hire needed staff.

“We don’t have the staff capacity to do all the things that can really enhance people’s experiences in our programs,” she said. “To have energetic, innovative young people who have a passion for this kind of work makes all the difference.”

Deajha Baskin is a children and families studies major at Berea College, in Kentucky. Through her internship, she has developed programming and activities for children living at the YWCA Sojourner’s Shelter for Homeless Women & Families.

“We keep the kids while the parents find jobs and housing,” she said, adding that on any given day she can be watching a six month old and teenagers at the same time.

“I have learned a lot from the kids, but I learned the most from the parents,” Baskin said. “I’ve seen women work so hard and not break down. I’ve learned not to judge someone based on where they come from.”

The students live on \$14 a day while residing together in apartments and homes in Charleston in the areas where they are serving.

“We get out and explore the community. It’s apparent that Charleston is so much more than the bad rap it’s getting,” Margaret Thonnard, who is working at Kanawha County Public Defender Services, said. She is a pre-law student at Baylor University, in Texas.

The program hopes to entrench the interns in their communities to greater understand the complexities of poverty and get to know the people they’re regularly working with.

Morash said the overall experience can sometimes influence students’ future career plans.

Keaira Williams, a pre-med major at Millsaps College, in Jackson, Mississippi, entered the internship planning to study sports medicine.

After spending the summer working with women at the YWCA’s Shanklin Center and Empowerment Homes for Women, Williams said she wants a medical career that will give her the opportunity to serve her community.

“Creating relationships with the women helped me understand more of who I am and what I want out of life,” she said.

The students have been impressed with Charleston – citing FestivALL and Live on the Levee as some of its best activities – but have found that the city’s great asset is the collaboration between its service providers when serving people experiencing poverty.

“All the programs, all the nonprofits work together. I think that’s the most appealing and compelling thing because in so many other cities, that’s not how nonprofits work,” Williams said.

Sara Busse has advocated for SHECP interns in Charleston for six years after her daughter participated in the program as an intern placed in New Jersey.

She runs Trinity Table and is hosting a SHECP intern who she shares with Manna Meal and the Covenant House pantry.

“I think they’re really ambassadors for us because they have gone on to other places who use Charleston as an example of how to run social services. That’s a cool thing for us to be proud of,” Busse said.

The students will finish up their 10-week internships in August.