(https://hebrewcollege.edu/about/hebrew-colleges-response-to-coronavirus/)



(https://hebrewcollege.edu)

Making Change Together

Welcome! We are the Covid Youth Commission (CYC), a program of Hebrew College (http://hebrewcollege.edu) and The Center for Teen Empowerment (https://teenempowerment.org/). Our commission is composed of a diverse group of youth (26 + mentors) from Greater Boston who are passionate about addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, including some longstanding justice issues that this health crisis has brought to light or exacerbated.

Here, you can find updates on our work, brief personal reflections from youth commissioners and guests about their COVID experiences, and resources for teens and others.

It is our hope that by the close of this initiative in late June, 2021, we will have used our collective wisdom and power to create positive change in our communities and inspire others to do the same.



IN THE NEWS!

Read about our work (https://www.jewishboston.com/read/young-activists-tackle-pandemic-driveninequality/)in the article "Young Activists Tackle Pandemic-Driven Inequality" (JewishBoston, May 4, 2021)

Follow us on Instagram @covid.youth.commission



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Commissioners COVID Activities Resources Partners Chronicles

BREETIKA MAHARJAN

How would you describe your experience with CYC?

My experience with CYC has been a very worthwhile experience. I've been able to connect with here a provide the second of the se



our actions, such as our food insecurity informational sessions and volunteer day, I've gained more confidence as a youth advocate to bring substantive change to my community.

Please share more about your work with the Advocacy team?

Our team has worked to connect more volunteers to food pantries in need of additional support due to the increased rates of food insecurity resulting from Covid. To reach this goal, the advocacy group and I hosted volunteer informational zoom sessions, connecting potential volunteers to local food pantries. Our group also organized an official volunteer day at the Bread of Life facility in Malden to give people (especially youth) an opportunity to experience and contribute to the work of an active and vital food pantry. Finally, our team mentor has organized an email banking evening for CYC in which we will send letters to our elected officials urging them to support legislation to address different issues related to food insecurity.

As my experience with CYC winds down, I want to continue to help the pantries we are working with receive a steady stream of "helping hands." I also want to continue my own volunteering at my local food pantry.

What is one activity you look forward to exploring, resuming, or doing more of as the pandemic eases up?

I am looking forward to traveling back to Nepal where many of my extended family members live as the pandemic eases up. Traveling beyond my backyard in general is something I am really looking forward to. I can already imagine the gentle breeze of the ocean waves and the bright sun beaming down. I am looking forward to traveling with my family on trips to amusement parks. I am looking forward to meeting my friends in person rather than on a 4 by 6 inch screen. I am looking forward to also meeting up with the new friends I made virtually through CYC.

What is one piece of advice you would give to a peer who is having a hard time because of the pandemic?

My advice is to try and see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I would suggest that they write down the things that bring a smile to their faces—even now as they are struggling. These notes can serve as affirmations that one can hold dear and focus on. The pandemic made many people feel like they're alone with no end in sight. Please know that you are not alone in feeling sad or isolated. This is the first step in overcoming the dark clouds of the pandemic. There is sunlight peeking through those clouds.

JACOB GURDIN

(https://hebrewcollege.edu/about/hebrew-colleges-response-to-co<mark>ronavirus/</mark> How did you manage yourself emotionally during the pandemic?

One important coping mechanism for me during COVID has been playing hockey and working out regularly. This has kept me in good physical shape and has helped me lower my anxiety and focus more on what I can do. This

has included school work and other extracurricular activities like the CYC. There has been so much craziness in the world and it is hard to face it every day, so I have tried to pick my activities carefully, stay busy, and keep my balance.

In what ways have you interacted with people differently since the pandemic started?

The main way that I have interacted with people differently since the pandemic started is by using Zoom, FaceTime, and other digital tools. Before the pandemic, I thought if these as supplemental to my school and social life, but they have been lifelines at different points over the last 15 months. While I am really excited to be returning to more in-person interactions with friends, classmates, and teammates, I think I will also continue to use Zoom and other similar platforms for years to come, especially with people living at a great distance from me.

In what ways have your goals changed throughout the pandemic? Have you discovered new or different interests or priorities?

One way that my goals have changed during the pandemic is that I want to become more focused and committed to helping people negatively affected by the events of the this past year and a half. I have begun to so this through the CYC, but I have much more work to do to with the Commission and long after the program ends. Part of what I learned is that many people who were already struggling (housing, food, mental health, etc.) have had an even harder time because of COVID. There is a lot of work for us to do as a society as we emerge from the pandemic.

Who were the people that provided you with comfort and support during quarantine?

My family provided me with great comfort and support during quarantine. I am fortunate to have loving parents and siblings. I also spent more time this year connecting with my extended family in different parts of the country. This was particularly important when my grandmother became ill and then passed away in the early spring. Because of COVID restrictions, we had to communicate with her and others over Zoom. It is really hard to lose someone you love without being able to spend time with them in person. It also made it more important for me and my immediate family to speak with my cousins, uncles and aunts, and my other grandmother. I am also really grateful to my friends with whom I spoke regularly, including when I had COVID and my family and I were fully quarantined.



PHYLS EUTSAY (https://www.instagram.com/p/CO_r8GhFwb_/)

(https://hebrewcollege.edu/about/hebrew-colleges-response-to-cord What have you learned about yourself over the course of the pandemic?

One important insight I have gained over the last year is that I am too hard on myself and don't give myself enough credit when it is due. I really push myself to try to be a good person and help others and am working on acknowledging and taking pride in my achievements, especially during these trying times.



What is one song that you would choose to give voice to your COVID experience?

A song that sums up my COVID experience is "Dashboard" (https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=penvn9VL32Y) by Modest Mouse because of one line that repeats throughout the song (https://genius.com/Modest-mouse-dashboard-lyrics), "Oh, it should've been, could've been. Worse than you would ever know..."The pandemic has impacted people very differently—even people in the same home or community—and while it has been hard for me, I know there are many others that have suffered in ways I can't even imagine. I feel so thankful that we are starting to move in a more positive direction in this country; we are able to see the light at the end of the long and dark COVID tunnel.

What project are you working on with the Commission? Why?

I am part of the Direct Service Group, and within that group I am serving on the budgeting/donations committee. We are currently soliciting and gathering donations for the COVID care kits our group is assembling for local homeless shelters. Our group decided to take on this project because we wanted to be able to contribute in a hands-on way. We also want to show the community that even though we are all going through a difficult time, we need to care for those who are most vulnerable.

What is one key learning from your time on the Commission?

One key learning experience is that you're never alone and that there are other people going through similar experiences who can be kind and caring friends and mentors. We all have the capacity to sympathize and empathize with others, and we need each other. I have also learned that there are many other teens that are willing to be vulnerable and want to give back to the community. My peers are showing the world that youth can be a powerful force for change and need to be seen and heard.

DAISY OGBESOYEN (https://www.instagram.com/p/CObYXPzrgKI/)

What is your action team planning to do? Why?

My group is planning to host a volunteer day in partnership with local food pantries. We are invitingsynthe from our companyities been large the esponse-to-coronavirus volunteer pool at the pantries. We are doing so because over the last year we have witnessed how COVID has created an urgent need for volunteers to help respond to heightened levels of food insecurity. We are also trying to help destigmatize the use of food pantries by sharing information with volunteers, family, and friends about the vital work pantries do and that using them should not be a source of embarrassment or shame.



What is one key learning from your CYC experience to date?

One key learning from my CYC experience is that there are many things youth and families are battling that have been amplified by COVID-19. I didn't really understand the concept of food insecurity before beginning my work. For example, I thought that as long as people had enough food, they were secure. I did not understand how many people are not getting nutritious food and how that impacts their health. I now see this more clearly in my own neighborhood, where so many people shop at corner stores and aren't getting enough fresh fruits and vegetables. We need better access to nutritious and affordable food locally and more education on healthy eating.

What is one activity you look forward to exploring, resuming, or doing more of as the pandemic eases up?

One activity I look forward to exploring as the pandemic eases up is kayaking. I had the opportunity to do it briefly over one summer before COVID. I can't wait to return to the water with my paddle. I love getting out on the water, stopping my paddling, and experiencing the calming feeling of being in the still water. I could not have imagined that such a simple and enjoyable activity would be inaccessible for more than a year.

What advice do you have for other teens who may be struggling with COVID-related issues?

My best advice would be to go outside. It may be hard to do in the city, but find a field, a patch of grass, or any open space without concrete architecture. Once you find that space, take a deep breath, stretch out your arms, and look up at the sky. Remember that the world is a big place and your position in it right now is not what it will always be. Some day soon you will look up at the sky from a place of your choosing under very different circumstances.

CHARLOTTE BRUCE Children's Health Watch

What is the mission of Children's HealthWatch?

The mission of **Children's HealthWatch** (https://childrenshealthwatch.org/) is to advance child health(https://hand.improve the health) of youngo (higher response to convirus/) by informing policies that alleviate economic hardships. We achieve this mission by conducting interviews with families of infants and toddlers in hospitals located in Boston, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Little Rock and sharing our findings with decision makers and the public in order to inform policies that give all children equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.



What is your role in Children's HealthWatch and what does the work entail?

I serve as the Research & Policy Analyst for Children. In this role, I support and carry out research and policy work with the Center Team - headquartered at **Boston Medical Center (https://www.bmc.org/)** - with a particular focus on Massachusetts and federal policy. On the state and federal levels, I participate in multiple, diverse coalitions across housing and homelessness prevention, food access and security, childcare, and economic stability. I also work closely with my colleagues to co-lead the MA-based **Healthy Families EITC Coalition (https://childrenshealthwatch.org/public-policy/hfec/)** and the country-wide **Hunger Vital Sign™ (https://frac.org/screen-intervene/hunger-vital-sign-graphic-oct-2019)** National Community of Practice as well as advocate for bold, evidence-based policies focused on families and children on the federal level. This work often includes meeting with legislative offices and committee staff, participating in national advocacy efforts, and producing research and policy-focused publications for various audiences that highlight the relationship between hardship, child health, and policy.

How does food insecurity affect a child and their family?

Ample research shows food insecurity - a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy, lifestyle - has immediate and long-term effects on the brains and bodies of children and their families even when experienced at the mildest levels. Young children in families struggling with food insecurity are at risk of poor physical health, growth, and brain development. When children do not get the nutrients they need, it impacts their current and future health well into adulthood. Further, when parents are unable to afford food, they are more likely to report depression and fair or poor overall health.

In what ways has food insecurity changed during COVID?

Food insecurity has been a major public health crisis across the United States for decades. In 2019, more than 1 in 10 households in the US experienced food insecurity, with higher rates among households with children under 6 years old (14.5 percent), Black households (19.1 percent), and Latinx households (15.6 percent). The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis exacerbated this crisis, as widespread loss of work and financial resources made it more difficult for families to afford or consistently access healthy food. While we do not know the exact rate of food insecurity in 2020, **Feeding America (https://www.feedingamerica.org/?** s_src=Y21XP4B1Y&s_keyword=feeding%20america&s_subsrc=c&ga=2.28983356.1241481634.1620832813700385313.16208328138__gac=1.146341025.1620832813.d1e87bfb5a761424526d1b60a850b3dd), a nonprofit and nationwide: network of hunged relief or ganizations estimated that this in People - including 1 in 5 children - may have experienced food insecurity in 2020, and projects that 1 in 9 people - including 1 in 6 children - may experience food insecurity in 2021.

Do you see progress in food security being addressed and actions being taken to solve this problem?

Yes. The pandemic has highlighted deep and persistent economic and health inequities in the US and underscored the need for significant government support to prevent food insecurity and other hardships. Over the past year, Congress has authorized numerous programs and policies in response to the immediate financial impact of COVID-19 and rising hardships. These included direct financial resources to families with low and moderate incomes, as well as temporary supplements and modifications to our federal nutrition programs. Such responses included increases to benefit allotments for some families that participate in the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutritionassistance-program)** (SNAP) and the **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic)** (WIC), the creation of a **Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) (Pandemic%20Electronic%20Benefits%20Transfer%20(P-EBT)%20program)** program for children who lost access to school and child care meals during closures, and other solutions that increase access and participation in these critical support programs. In the wake of COVID-19, I see a great opportunity to build on success of these programs by making these temporary changes permanent and investing in additional longterm measures that keep food on the table for all families and sustain and enhance federal nutrition programs necessary to reduce threats to food insecurity and health.

What can the average person, including youth, do to help with issues of food insecurity?

Access to food and to all other basic needs is a human right, and our policymakers must recognize and rectify this. Each of us can reach out to our elected officials - by phone, email, social media - to share our story and let them know that addressing food insecurity and its root causes are a priority. You can find your legislator **here. (https://malegislature.gov/Search/FindMyLegislator)**

Charlotte Bruce is the Research & Policy Analyst of Children's HealthWatch. In this role, Charlotte is responsible for supporting and carrying out research and policy work with the Center Team, with a particular focus on state and federal policies. In close coordination with the Director of Innovative Partnerships, she participates in the ongoing management, strategy, and growth of the Hunger Vital Sign™ National Community of Practice, as well as other national and state coalitions including co-leading the Research Task Force of the Food Is Medicine Massachusetts Coalition. Previously, Charlotte split her Research & Policy Analyst role to serve also as the Boston Site Coordinator. As the Site Coordinator, she supervised data collection in the Boston Medical Center Pediatric Emergency Department and managed resource and outreach activities. Charlotte received her BS and Master of Public Health from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

KAWTAR BENLEKBIR (https://www.instagram.com/p/CN_PDYmravq/)

(https://hebrewcollege.edu/about/hebrew-colleges-response-to-coronav<mark>irus/)</mark> What is one thing you have learned about yourself over the course of the pandemic?

One person who has been very helpful to me during the pandemic is my best friend Stephanie. She is always there for me as an emotional support for my rants or just to chit chat. We go to the same school and help each other out with schoolwork. We talk almost everyday, which has been great because she leaves me feeling reassured that we both are going to get through this unpredictable and painful time. I feel so fortunate to have Stephanie in my life.

Is there an activity or place that has helped you ground yourself during this challenging and uncertain time?

Over the last year I have explored my creative side. When I was younger, I loved crafts and was always coming up with something new. As I grew older, however, I became busy with school and extracurricular activities and my creative side was suppressed. But with more free time during quarantine I began painting and have been enjoying it a lot. I find myself more interested in the creative process than the paintings I produce.

What is one key learning from your CYC experience to date?

Among my goals as a commission member is to be able to develop new leadership skills such as public speaking and writing. I also think it is important that at the end of the Commission process we can look back at our work and feel like we have achieved the goals we set for ourselves. Even though it is sometimes tough to get on Zoom and work at the end of a long day, we are fortunate to be coming together to help heal our city.

What advice do you have for other teens who may be struggling with COVID-related issues?

The direct service team is creating COVID kits for several homeless shelters. The struggles that those who are homeless face are heightened during these times. The team wants to equip people with essential items needed during this pandemic such as masks and hand sanitizer. We are also including information in the kits on locations that provide free COVID testing. The overall goal of the team is to provide key resources to those who need it most.

LaSHYRA "LASH" NOLAN

Why did you decide to become a doctor?





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I decided to become a doctor because I really wanted a career that would allow me to serve and healmayscomputity negative also exploring modeless for sporise to coronavirus/) and public health. I also believe doctors are uniquely positioned to advocate for social justice because they see firsthand how the ills of society, whether that be lack of access to healthcare or equitable housing, manifest as disease in the body. For me, being a doctor means that I have the opportunity to help improve my community's health on both the individual and collective level.



What kind of doctor do you want to be? Why?

I would like to be a physician-activist. For me that means getting a Master's in

Public Policy in addition to my MD, so that I can advocate for policy reform that impacts the lives of my patients beyond the clinical setting. As of now, I'm really interested in adolescent medicine, internal medicine, and emergency medicine. I think all of these fields will give me a broad understanding of the greatest societal barriers my community faces while also building meaningful relationships with patients.

Why did you create We Got Us (https://www.wegotusproject.org/)?

I created We Got Us because I saw that my community wasn't receiving equal access to reliable information about the COVID vaccines. I knew this was related to centuries of systemic racism that have created disparities in representation in the medical field, and I knew the media's focus on "hesitancy" among communities of color would lead to a conversation that didn't focus enough on access. We Got Us was created to bring students, community activists, and health professionals together for the purpose of empowering our community.

The project has been going really well! We have had over 300 attendees at our various empowerment sessions, and we are collaborating with over 30 community partners. We have even started to do in-person events and canvassing. Every week our team is out in the community getting folks vaccine appointments and answering their questions, and we're continuing to think creatively about new events. We'll be having a comedy show and paint night in May, both centered around education, empowerment, and community.

Our organization is all about empowerment and community building, and WGU plans to continue to do this work far beyond the pandemic. We want to equip our communities with the information they need to combat hypertension, colon cancer, maternal mortality, etc., while also advocating for their increased access to healthcare. COVID was the impetus to start this work, and we plan on continuing it for as long as our communities need it because "we got us!"

LaShyra "Lash" Nolen is a Los Angeles native deeply passionate about the concerns of underserved and marginalized communities. She graduated with honors from Loyola Marymount University in 2017 with a B.S. in Health and Human Sciences. She then spent two gap years before starting medical school, the first as a Fulbright Scholar in Spain and the second as an AmeriCorps health educator in Chicago. Currently, she is a second-year student at Harvard Medical School where she is serving as student council president of her classified first documented block ween ween to held this leadership maining). She is a published author and fervent advocate for social justice whose commentary has been published in the Boston Globe, New England Journal of Medicine, Nature, and HuffPost, among others. Lash is also a Foster Scholar in Health Policy, Advocacy, and Media at the MGH Stoeckle Center for Primary Care Innovation and a co-host for the Clinical Problem Solvers Anti-Racism in Medicine podcast. Most recently she founded "We Got Us", a grassroots community empowerment project with the goal of bringing vaccine education to Black communities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her work has earned her the honor of becoming the 2020 National Minority Quality Forum's youngest "40 under 40 Leader in Minority Health", named a "2020 Young Futurist" by The Root Magazine, and the 2021 recipient of the American Medical Student Association's Racial Justice in Medicine Award.

ARIANA PEGUERO (https://www.instagram.com/p/CNaiRQ0FaOc/)

What is one thing you have learned about yourself over the course of the pandemic?

One key thing I have learned about myself over the last year is just how important friendships are to me. After having my social life taken away from me very suddenly, I have learned that I can't take my time with my friends for granted. Even though I have always valued my friends, I was often shy and scared of embarrasing myself in front of them. I know once life returns to normal, I will put myself out there more and express my



appreciation for the time I get to spend with the people I love. I can't wait to hug my friends, since touch is my love language.

Is there an activity or place that has helped you ground yourself during this challenging and uncertain time?

Music has definitely kept me grounded during the pandemic. I have discovered some amazing new artists and songs. Music has comforted and inspired me on many long nights when I have felt bored, lonely, or angry. When I put my earbuds in and jam out in my room, I can be transported on a spectacular world tour! Whether I am using music to help me express what I am feeling or to shut out the world and imagine a different reality, I know I have this incredible resource that will keep expanding the more I explore different sounds.

What is one key learning from your CYC experience to date?

One important thing I have learned from my CYC experience is that I am on my own unique path. In the past, I would often compare myself to the initial sector of the secto

What advice do you have for other teens who may be struggling with COVID-related issues?

I would tell other teens to find one thing that keeps you going and gives you joy. It doesn't have to be anything dramatic; it could be something as simple as journaling, taking your dog on a walk, or reading a new book. It can also awaken a dormant talent or passion in you and help you lead a healthier, more productive life. These activities won't make all the tough stuff go away, but it can really help you make it through the day. And if you can find hobbies that connect you with other people (even if online), you can make new friends through a common interest.

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KILEY FRAY (https://www.instagram.com/p/CNtKaFvL3aw/)

If you were to describe your COVID experience through a song, what would it be? Why?

One song that describes my COVID experience (and one I have listened to a lot over the last year) is "After the Storm (https://youtu.be/YqUsAHTUPTU)" by Mumford and Sons. Although it is a love song, it explores the themes of tragedy, hope, and recovery. I think that a lot of people would agree that hope in times of tragedy keeps us going, helping us to put one foot in front of the other.

What project are you working on with the Commission? Why did you and your team choose this project?

I'm working with the advocacy group, and we have decided to work on the issue of (hepd://hebreity.ollege.edu/about/hebreity.edu/about/hebreity.olleg

We feel that these two efforts complement each other because the more people see how important pantries are and the humanity



of the people who make use of them, the better we can work together to do away with the stigma.

What is one key learning from your Commission experience to date?

One thing I have learned from my experience with the Commission is that passion and empathy drive change. I see these qualities in my mentors and peers. I am also learning so much about how COVID has negatively impacted people struggling with housing, employment, mental health, and other issues. I feel inspired to try and make a difference with my fellow commissioners.

What is one activity you look forward to exploring, resuming, or doing more of as the pandemic eases up?

Over the course of quarantine, I have been exploring photography as a means of capturing all that is going on in my world and the world around me. As the pandemic eases up, I hope to be able to travel, see more sites, and use my creativity to share what I observe.

If you would like to support the COVID Youth Commission, please click the button below and choose "Miller Center" from the giving form drop-down menu. Thank you!

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