

■ WHEELING

YSS Wheeling SleepOut Returns This Friday

By **DEREK REDD**
Managing Editor

After a year of going fully remote, Youth Services System is bringing the Wheeling SleepOut back to the J.B. Chambers I-470 Athletic Complex.

Teams can still participate virtually, but the Miracle Field at the I-470 complex once again will be home to the event, which raises awareness about youth homelessness and raises money to help youth ages 17-21 find housing through the YSS Transitional Living Program.

The SleepOut begins at 6 p.m. Friday and concludes at 7 a.m. Saturday.

Groups participating in the SleepOut can simply sleep under the stars in tents at the Miracle Field or at home, or they can participate in the Boxed-In Design contest, where teams build structures out of cardboard and other items that a person is able to sleep in for a night. The theme for this year's contest is "Oh The Places You'll Go."

Celebrity judges will pick the winners for best in show, best overall design and best theme. Prizes also will be awarded to the top fundraisers.

Participants go to www.youthservicessystem.org/events to find an online registration form, a link to the Give Lively fundraising website where they create a profile and share with friends, and Boxed-In Design Contest guidelines.

Besty Bethel-McFarland, YSS' director of communications and grants, said the organization would like to know by Thursday if any group wanted to join the event.

YSS is setting up sites for each team so they can participate at a safe social distance.

Those who leave their pod areas will be asked to wear a mask until the return to their respective sites.

Bethel-McFarland added that the design competition is one of her highlights of the SleepOut.

"One of my favorite things about it is the team-building aspect," she said. "You're getting together with whatever group it is and



Photo courtesy of YSS

Participants from a local Girl Scout troop work on a box design at the 2019 Wheeling SleepOut. After going fully virtual last year, the event returns to the Miracle Field at the I-470 Athletic Complex on Friday. This year's is a hybrid event, where teams can participate at the complex or at home.

you're doing something together. It's a very creative process. And you learn about what the statistics are and what somebody would actually be experiencing if they had to sleep outside."

The money raised at this event is extremely important, Bethel-McFarland said. With it, YSS can help a wider array of youth in need. According to YSS, the percentage of disconnected youth in West Virginia has decreased from 20% to 15% in the past 10 years but is still more than the national rate of 11%.

Last year, YSS served 121 youth in the program, a 20% in-

crease over the previous year.

"The money that we use can help the kids who don't fall into any of the grant-funded categories," she said. "That money can be used if a kid isn't considered by the federal government to be a runaway homeless youth and doesn't fit into that basket. Or if it's not a foster kid and doesn't fall into a state-funded basket."

Musicians New Age Adenas and Gage Joseph will perform at the field and others will provide entertainment virtually. To set up a team or donate, text WSO2021 to 44-321 or go to <https://tinyurl.com/wheelingsleepout2021>.