

# Annual Report

2021



# THE VIEW FROM HERE

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"It was as if our strategic plan leapt off the page and into reality in a matter of months."

This is how I have described 2021 at Western Youth Network (WYN).

In 2017, WYN created an ambitious 5-year plan to achieve better visibility, retain an elite staff, cultivate a dynamic Board of Directors, and achieve greater fiscal stability and sustainability. Those goals were advanced from 2017-2020 and will always be a work in progress.

Then, in late 2020 and into 2021, our visions of expanding our services to other counties and obtaining a more visible headquarters came into view. We were invited to provide afterschool programming in Ashe County in 2020 and in Alleghany County in early 2021. Also in early 2021, we located two exciting properties in the heart of Boone's Wellness District (near Watauga Medical Center) which we later purchased for constructing our headquarters in Watauga. This location will also serve as a much-needed youth center that will allow for expansion and will be accessible to WYN children in other counties as well.

We are so excited for what this growth means to our communities and children, and we remain very aware that none of this would be possible without you! I hope you enjoy seeing all of the ways that you've made a huge difference in the lives of High Country children as you read this report.



**"It was as if our strategic plan leapt off the page and into reality in a matter of months."**

**JENNIFER WARREN**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## LETTER FROM A PARENT

WYN has had, and continues to have, a positive impact on my child and myself as a parent/guardian. **The program cannot receive enough acclamation to what it has meant to our family.** This program has been a "God-send" to our family and community when we were at wits end to find a positive program for our children in the afterschool hours and when parents/ guardians still needed to be in the workplace.

**My child has blossomed in so many ways** while in the WYN program. Their positive attitude to help the children with their social-emotional health has allowed my child to overcome behavioral problems he is having. He has become more self-resilient and able to handle situations in a positive manner where earlier he would have meltdowns. The quiet patience of the counselors has helped my child to desire to follow through and try to resolve issues in all areas of his life.



The positive bonds that he has established with the counselors were seen when a counselor's last day took place. He was sobbing uncontrollably when I came to pick him up. I was afraid that something bad had happened. But to my relief, he was upset because he would not be seeing the counselor again. This reaction to a counselor provided the evidence of how this program has such a positive impact on the children.

Whenever I come in to pick up my child, **there is always an air of fun, enjoyment, encouragement, and teamwork in the room.** Not only has there been a positive impact for my child, but it has been a positive impact in the lives of parents/guardians. In my job, I am still at work after school hours have ended. Not having a constant and reliable after school babysitter, I was struggling with providing that care for my child. **WYN has been a constant and reliable place for me to have peace of mind that my child is in a safe and caring environment until I am finished with my job** on a daily basis during the workweek. Also having child care during school workdays has been extremely beneficial for me.

The positive and thoughtful ways that counselors have helped my child work through difficult times with his behaviors has also helped our times at home and at school. **They have provided him with strategies to use and he has implemented them in other environments.** Thus, helping him in all areas of his life. This has made our daily lives as parents so much easier. **Enrolling my child in the WYN Program has been one of the best decisions I have ever made.** The positive changes I have seen in my child can be partly attributed to his interactions with counselors and other children while attending the program. His desire to be involved in the activities with the program, and his positive close relationships he has made with counselors is evidence of the close bonds he has developed while there.

I am hoping and praying that this program will continue to be provided to our children in Ashe County. **I cannot say enough high praises for what this program has meant to our county, but also for my child and our family.**

# after school & SUMMER CAMP

Our Watauga community has known for years that by offering students a fun, safe environment with trusted adults, we can mitigate the impact of ACEs for students in our afterschool and summer camp programs. Because of WYN's expansion into Ashe and Alleghany counties in 2020 and 2021, **90% more students learned resiliency skills, social skills, and healthy coping mechanisms. 90% more students were given the opportunity to explore their interests** and try new things, building confidence in themselves and the world around them. In the past year, WYN has impacted more students than ever before. Staff in these regions are utilizing the skills and interventions that WYN knows have a positive impact on children who have faced adversity, just as staff in Watauga County have done for decades.

**160**

youth served by  
after school  
programming  
across counties

**38**

summer field  
trips in all  
service counties

**73**

youth served by  
summer  
programming  
across counties

At our **Watauga County Site**, one of our students' favorite elements of programming is Friday Clubs. Students are given the opportunity to share which clubs they would like to see each month and staff make the clubs based on their answers. Each week on Friday, students are able to choose from four clubs, each one led by a staff member. Cooking club is a staple and is always a Friday option. A small group of students cook a meal with a staff member for the entire group and they sit down and eat together each week. Other clubs change frequently and students are able to give their input on options from which they can choose. We have featured board games, science experiments, arts and crafts of all kinds, sports, and holiday themed clubs. Our staff always looks forward to these small group activities and a chance to spend time with our kids while they are relaxed and excited about the activity in front of them.

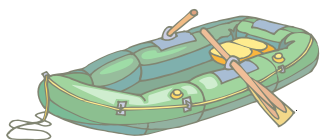


During 2021 Summer Camp at our **Watauga County Site**, staff worked diligently to find ways for our participants to seek adventure while still following COVID guidelines. Trips like rock climbing, whitewater rafting, and going to Watauga Lake were some of the favorites for the kids and staff. Even after summer camp, participants talked about their summer adventures with their families and were very excited to take their loved ones to locations that they visited during the summer.

One of our most memorable and highly anticipated trips was whitewater rafting on the Watauga River in Tennessee. Participants enjoyed rafting, swimming in the river, jumping off cliffs into the river, and a fun game of pirate, in which they would try to knock other out of the opposing boat. We had a lot of great memories on this trip.



Three of our kids, Braley, Jasmine, and Carter, said that the rafting trip was their favorite trip of the summer. When asked why it was their favorite, Braley said, "I liked riding the bull (the front of the boat)!" She enjoyed having the water splash her when her boat went into the rapids!



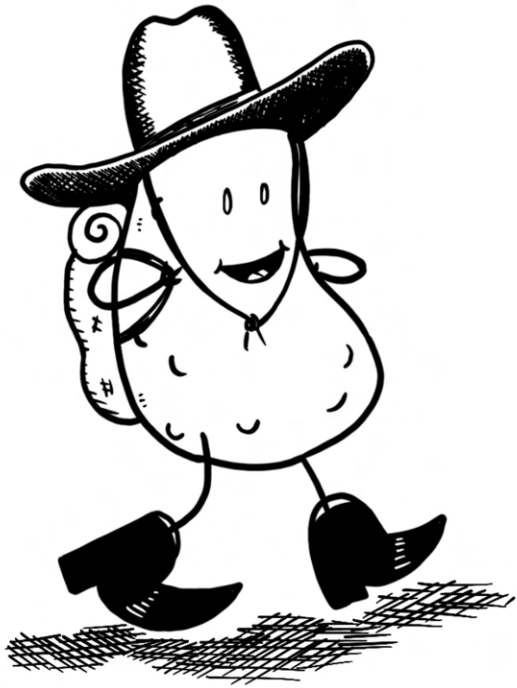
For Carter, his favorite part about the rafting trip was being able to swim next to the raft. He really enjoyed spending time in the water and jumped out as soon as he was able to!



Jasmine said her favorite part of the rafting trip was "jumping off of the rock at the beginning of the trip!"




# after school & SUMMER CAMP



Mr. Pickle by Will Graham

In 2021, our **Ashe County Site** evolved into something staff and students now refer to as Camp Pickle (named after their beloved, red cowboy hat wearing mascot, Mr. Pickle). While at Camp Pickle, students have had the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of enrichment activities centered around important life skills such as self-control, cooperation, coping skills, and more. To practice each different life skill, students have been provided with an assortment of enrichment activities such as explosive science experiments, wacky art projects, story time adventures, games, and even a few crazy homemade escape rooms that really put students' skills to the test.



Over the summer, in addition to offering our usual enrichment activities, Camp Pickle WYNNers had the opportunity to go on some pretty awesome field trips.

They journeyed to a zoo, an art museum, two different science centers, and a climbing gym, to name a few!

Though these regional trips were memorable for sure, one of their favorite summer memories occurred when Camp Pickle visited the Boone Fork Trail. During this excursion, while older campers enjoyed hiking to the waterfalls, younger campers spent some time splashing around in the creek and enjoying the magnificent beauty of their own High Country community.



At our **Sparta School Alleghany County Site**, it has been a joy to watch a group of strangers come together to form a close-knit family.

Students may have started out by saying that they didn't have many friends and that they didn't have a solution to "fix" that reality, but it didn't take long for a natural bond to quickly grow within this afterschool community.



The staff greatly attribute this progress to the enrichment activities they provide as well as their daily circle time. Sometimes during circle time the staff will ask seemingly silly or insignificant things like, "Who is your favorite musical artist?" or "If you had a super power what would it be?" Other times, they ask questions that are a bit more significant like, "What is something you struggled with today?" or "What is something that frustrated you?" or "What is something exciting that happened to you today that we can celebrate with you?" Whether good or bad, upbeat, or not so much, the answers the students give bond them together. They realize someone else is feeling what they're feeling and suddenly everyone feels less alone.



Our students have learned that they can confide in each other and in staff. The younger kids have always been interested in (and have looked up to) the older ones, but just recently, the older students have started including them and accepting their leadership role, and it's a really special thing to see. They have become protective of the younger ones, like siblings, and look out for them.

The students know that no matter what things are like outside of our WYN walls, they always have a safe space, a listening ear, and a friend inside of these walls, and that is a new feeling to a lot of them.

# after school & SUMMER CAMP

## Piney Creek School Alleghany Site

kids have been learning about how the brain works, using the **wise owl** and **barking dog**.

The **wise owl** represents the prefrontal cortex that is in charge of thinking and making smart choices. The **barking dog** is the amygdala that is in charge of our emotions.

Our students learned about rapid resets to help them calm their **barking dog** when they get upset.

Our staff even created handmade puppets (below) to symbolize the owl and the dog!



A second grader in the program started off the year with bouts of crying when things were tough. These bouts might last for 30 minutes and were instigated by things that may have seemed insignificant to an adult. After lots of circle time discussions about coping skills, learning how the brain works with the wise owl and barking dog, and teaching resiliency skills, this student is now able to regulate herself more and more. The sad times happen less frequently and for shorter time periods. She likes the "take a sip" tool to help calm herself down. "Take a sip" involves taking a sip of water and then noticing how it feels in your mouth and as it goes down your throat. It's a great way to calm your mind, create body awareness and bring yourself into the present moment.



# HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS

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WYN continued to take a more tailored approach to High School Success in 2021. At the beginning of the year, WYN staff continued to reach out to high school students virtually. Tutoring was offered along with time to socialize with each other, and to build strong relationships with trusted adults. Students began to look forward to weekly meetings with WYN staff. As 2021 continued, the leadership for High School Success shifted as WYN entered a partnership with Mountain Alliance.



WYN understands what a difficult transition middle school to high school can be, and we're excited to have a physical presence once again in the high school. Mountain Alliance staff was able to work with WYN to intentionally interact with WYN's 9th grade students as they made the transition to high school in the Fall of 2021, and invite them to programming like the "School's Out" afterschool program and adventure-based trips. WYN's afterschool and mentoring staff have been able to meet with Mountain Alliance staff and point them towards students they know need extra encouragement and support through their high school experience. Because this has given WYN staff the opportunity to visit students in the high school, students are reassured that WYN's support does not stop once they've aged out of afterschool or have wrapped up with their mentors. Instead they are able to stay connected to the staff that supported them through their middle school years. Staff from both organizations are also planning WYN Days, in which Mountain Alliance staff will visit afterschool at WYN so that students go into the high school knowing familiar faces in 2022.



**98.7 %**

of youth reported improved hope and resilience



**20,500**

tutoring hours provided in all afterschool programs



**96.2%**

of youth reported improved self-esteem



**2,869**

total mentoring hours



**94.5%**

of youth state that their relationship with their mentor is important to them



**16,667** healthy snacks served



# MENTORING

Mentoring in the midst of a global pandemic has produced a lot of challenges. Many of our youth experienced profound levels of trauma, from losing a parent or loved one, to the more typical challenges of parents being incarcerated or misusing alcohol and drugs in the home or even physically hurting their children. Throughout everything, WYN mentors have continued to show up both virtually and physically. Mentors have brought bright positive energy to homes where things were feeling otherwise quite difficult and dark.

**87.5%**

of youth agree that there are two adults outside of their family that they look up to

**92.7%**

of youth feel comfortable talking with their mentor about how they feel



**87%**

of matches lasted a year or longer



**88%**

of youth served by mentoring live in single parent/non-traditional homes

Mentors can help provide a bridge from what life is like to what life could be. Mentors show up and believe in their mentee's dreams and help them make them a reality. For a few of our graduating seniors, we asked them about the impact their mentor had on their lives. Here is what they had to say about their mentoring relationships:



*“Having a mentor has given me the confidence and faith to try new things and realize that just because something goes wrong doesn’t mean it’s a failure.”*

*“I have learned that it’s ok to be yourself even when others disagree so long as you’re doing the right thing.”*

**Jordan, matched with Wysteria for 4.5 years will graduate June 2022**

*“She has supported me and helped me get useful resources for things I have questions about, and discover new things to do.”*

*“After high school, I hope to get my medical degree to become a psychiatrist.”  
Esmeralda hopes to attend UCLA or another university in California.*

**Esmeralda, matched with Caroline for 4.5 years, will graduate June 2022**



*“My mentor has helped me see my future and know I can do many things. I might go into the military, maybe the Marines.”*

**Michael**

*“Being with Michael (my mentee) has made me feel younger. It's taken me back to an earlier time in my life. We can fish, have target practice with the pellet gun and water ski together. We’ve had a lot of adventures.”*

**Butch**

**Michael, matched with Butch for 10 years, is now a sophomore in high school**



# COMMUNITY HEALTH

2021 found WYN's Community Health team continuing to evolve and grow in our understanding of how equity is essential to community health.

Primary prevention for substance use and misuse is often defined as "going upstream," and then we can take it even further by asking what water is feeding that stream. We ask these questions often in our work, and the answer lies in understanding **Social Determinants of Health**. This term is a blanket definition that describes the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, quality-of-life, and risks we navigate whether we are aware of them or not. These factors, while intersecting and overlapping, are often broken down into the following categories:

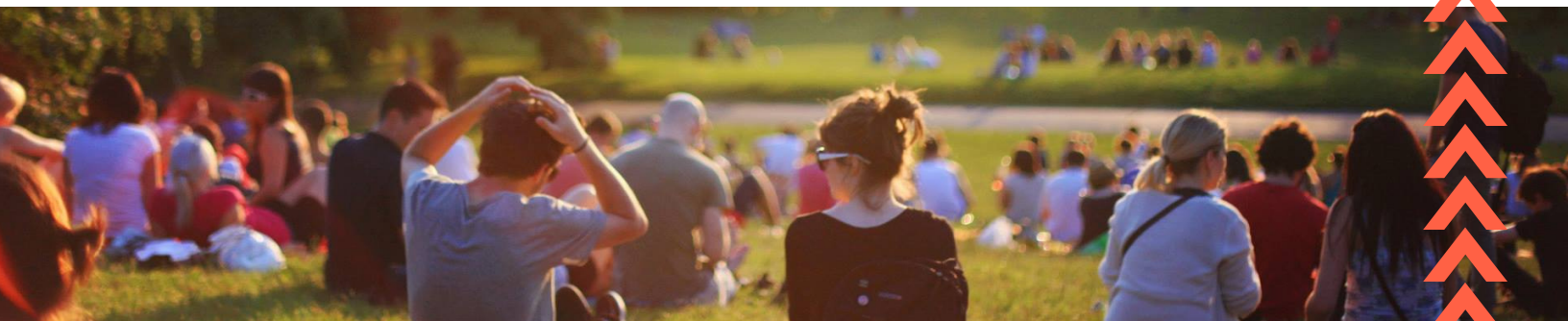
**881**  
Prevention Resources distributed regionally to families at Back to School Festivals and other events

**54**  
Prime for Life course participants

**35**  
community prevention meetings facilitated



## Social Determinants of Health



## Education

Studies show that incorporating trauma-informed policies and practices into educational systems improves academic and social outcomes. When we have educational expectations and norms that emphasize respect, connection, and community well-being, this gives our youth the space they need to maximize the academic benefit of their instruction throughout the year. The community health team spent much time working with school systems and other youth agencies to support this framework:

- Watauga Substance Action Prevention (WSAP) granted Watauga County Schools the funds to train 120 teachers on Calm Corners which give our youth resources for regulating their emotions and stresses throughout the school day so their brains are in a place to learn.
- WSAP partnered with local law enforcement to participate in the DARE programs conducted for 5th and 6th graders in Watauga County.
- WSAP trained two youth advocates on the strategic prevention framework so they had the tools to start a youth coalition at their school.
- Ashe Youth Task Force provided support and supplies to teachers and counseling staff in response to the increased mental and behavioral health needs of students
- Alleghany Youth Task Force conducted an art project with Alleghany elementary school students to create thank you cards for essential workers

**448**

Medication  
Lock Boxes  
distributed

**1,966,339**

people reached  
by billboard  
campaigns



## Health Care Access & Quality

When we think about access to health care, we tend to think about going to our family doctor or going to the hospital. However, access to good mental healthcare, dental care, and other key health providers must be addressed as well. Removing the stigma

surrounding Substance Use Disorders and mental and behavioral health needs is essential to preventing health issues and providing access to care for individuals with these needs. While some of us may live further from care, may not be able to afford it (either through being under-insured or having no insurance), or face other barriers in access, everyone, regardless of means, needs to be able to access quality healthcare.

- WYN's Community Health team works across counties in local coalitions to increase individual access to Mental Health supports
- The team assisted in creating the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) YouTube video series, "Shattering Stigma"
- Community Health staff served on the Behavioral & Mental Health subcommittees of multiple county coalitions
- The team provided resiliency trainings to community partners

# COMMUNITY HEALTH

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## Social & Community Access

Adrienne Maree Brown has said, "Community is a place to practice and participate in care, attention, knowing and being known, being protected, having room to make mistakes and still belong...not just allowed to be there, but be valuable...to heal. to recover. Community feels responsible for each other". The relationships we have with with family, friends, co-workers, classmates, and community members are vital to all the ranges of our health and well-being. Positive relationships across all the facets of our lives are the building blocks of resiliency and impact the ways that the other Social Determinants of of Health benefit us.

- WYN staff and volunteers conducted Synar Merchant Education with tobacco, vape, and nicotine retailers across the five county region to build and maintain relationships and to offer resources to retailers.
- Staff was able to return to in-person support of the Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club at Ashe County High School
- Prevention bags and Operation Parent Handbooks were distributed to parents, caregivers, and families during Back to School Festivals. During this, staff had multiple conversations with individuals about the safe storage of medication and alcohol while also providing information on how to support their children's social & emotional needs.
- Staff partnered with other nonprofits serving Avery County to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors with some additional funding from the state.

## Neighborhood & Built Environment

Our physical environment is one of the social determinants of health that can impact the way we feel about where we live and also shape our physical health. Built Neighborhoods & Environments include things like building design; transportation access including buses and walkability; access to parks, recreational and green spaces; the design and locations of schools; zoning issues; housing and neighborhood quality and inventory; exposure to pollutants and physical hazards; aesthetic and accessibility elements such as good lighting, trees, benches, etc.; and weather and climate issues. This is a huge category, yet it is one we don't often think about. However, these factors greatly affect the ways in which we move and live in our physical spaces.

- In an effort to reduce vaping at school, WSAP granted Watauga High School funds to install vape detectors in every bathroom and locker room.
- Staff distributed medication lockboxes and medication disposal systems to community agencies and at local events and festivals
- Staff conducted a Synar Coverage Study of tobacco and vape Merchants to assess retail density and accuracy of Statewide Merchant list
- Staff participated in First Annual New River Clean up Event with the New River Conservancy and Zalos Canoes



## Equity

Access, which has been mentioned a lot, provides a simple way to begin to understand equity. If equality is described as a door being open for everyone, equity asks who has access to the door and whether or not it is a door that is needed or useful. Our equitable access to resources has a lifelong impact on our chronic disease rates, quality of life, living wage employment, and life expectancy. As we've conducted the work spoken about on previous pages, we've also been advancing our knowledge of the equity needed to put these initiatives into practice through some of the following ways:

- Avery Youth Coalition created a customized survey to be administered at Avery High School. This survey was conducted in May 2021 providing our community with vital data regarding our youth. This information was then shared with the high school administration, Avery County Board of Education, and the Avery Youth Coalition.
- Our team partnered with AppHealth to conduct the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey to Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga counties
- Formulation of WYN's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Staff Assessment. This assessment will be a building block as we work towards a more knowledgeable DEI Framework within our staff trainings and agency policies.
- Partnered with the Racial Equity Institute to bring the Groundwater Approach to Equity Training to Ashe County in June 2021



## Economic Stability

Economic stability is more than just the cost of living and how much we make. Our economic stability can be further determined by the access we have to sustainable work as well as employers who support a healthy work/life balance. Economic stability also takes into account our community members who cannot work due to disabilities, injuries, and other conditions and ensures that they have access to basic needs like food, housing, and health care.

- Community Health staff serve on WCCI's Prevention & Policy Subcommittee, which performed a comparison of Family Friendly Workplace Policies with existing agency policies. This focus is to address ways to improve local agency practices and policies that support employees' needs
- WYN has reviewed and modified our own DEI & Family Friendly Policies through the lens of community health and equity
- Our team played a key role in the formation of the Watauga Housing Forum to address the rising housing costs and low residential inventory in Watauga County

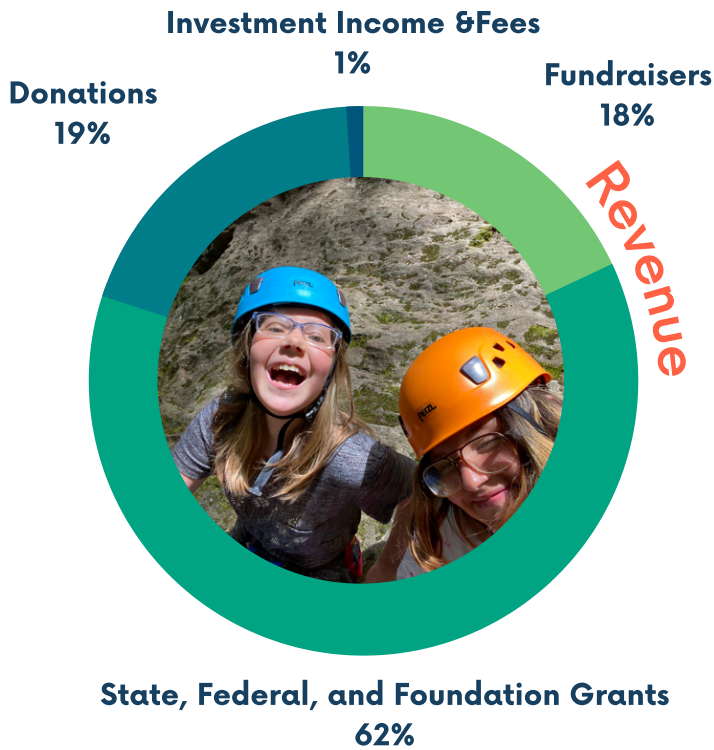
**3,147**

people reached by  
Lock Your Meds  
Communication  
campaigns

**14,995**

people reached  
by Community  
Health social  
media campaigns

# FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

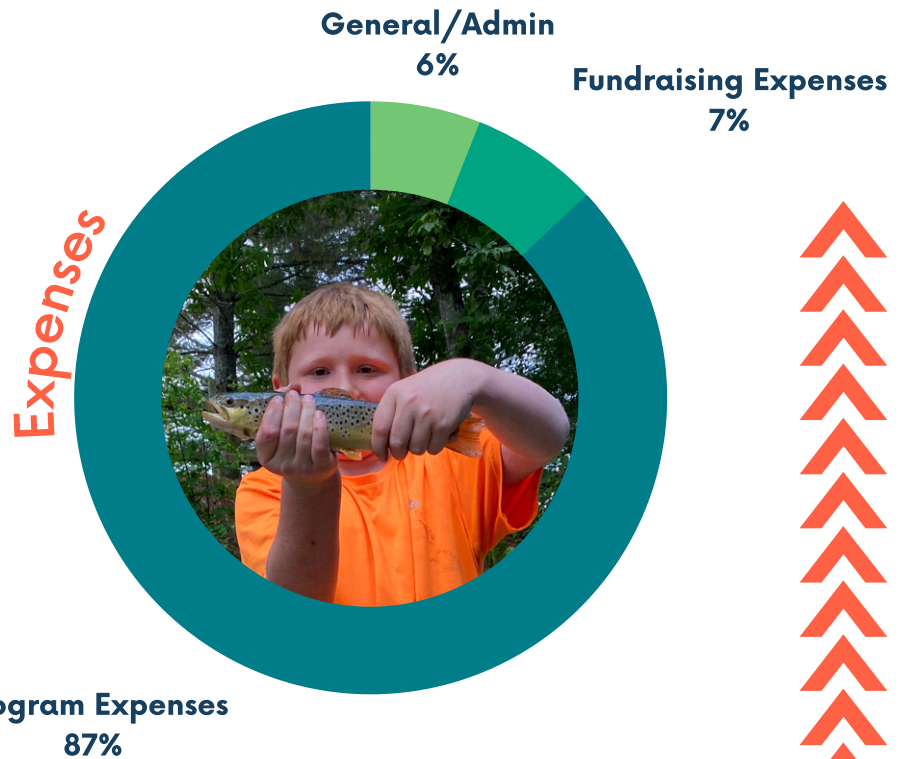


## Strategic Successes of 2021

- Afterschool expansion into Alleghany County - opened 2 new afterschool sites based out of Piney Creek and Sparta schools
- Safely reopened to in-person programming in March and stayed open in spite of various Covid surges throughout the year
- Purchased two new properties near Watauga Medical Center that will become WYN's new home in the future

## Opportunities for Growth in 2022

- Open one more afterschool site in Alleghany (Glade Creek School)
- Design and construct WYN's new facility and launch associated capital campaign
- Expand mentoring services to Ashe and Alleghany counties





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## Program Service Regions

**Mentoring** Avery & Watauga Counties  
**After School & Summer Camp** Watauga, Ashe, & Alleghany Counties  
**High School Success** Watauga County  
**Community Health** Watauga, Avery, Ashe, Alleghany, & Wilkes Counties


## GET INVOLVED TODAY!

It takes a community to raise a community. Your talents and resources could make a difference in a child's life.

Make a donation  
Apply to be a mentor  
Sign up to tutor  
Host a Facebook fundraiser



 @wynstagram\_1

 Western Youth Network

Find us online

[www.westernyouthnetwork.org](http://www.westernyouthnetwork.org)

