



2024 annual report

Empowering communities and transforming lives through targeted interventions, WYN is the catalyst for healthier, more resilient children across Watauga, Avery, Ashe, Alleghany, and Wilkes counties.

a word from WYN

2024 was a year like no other.

It was a year of exciting growth for WYN that was unfortunately dampened by the devastation Hurricane Helene brought to the High Country in late September.

Through the highs and lows of the year, what stands out to us is your support.

“How can I help” is a question you often asked us and you met the needs of WYN and our children and families all throughout the year.

Your support also allowed WYN to feed into our local economy in a variety of ways which we outlined on the next page. **For every dollar you donated, WYN turned that dollar into nearly two dollars and put it to work for the good of High Country children and the community.**

Now we turn our attention to a prosperous 2025, which also just happens to be WYN’s **40th anniversary**. It promises to be another banner year of growth and impact.

It is an honor to share the community of Western Youth Network with you — the highs, lows, joys and challenges. We hope you enjoy reading the pages that follow and know that it was your partnership that made it all possible.



▶▶▶
total # students served:
afterschool: **196**
summer camp: **119**
mentoring: **103**

▶▶▶
additional totals:

academic tutoring (afterschool): **10,356 hours**

of summer/afterschool field trips: **48 trips**

afterschool spring break trips: **28 students attended**

additional afterschool time*: **200 hours**

*due to weather-related circumstances

mentoring volunteer hours: **3,946 hours**

County	# of employees
Ashe	6
Avery	4
Alleghany	5
Watauga	13



Program	# of employees
Admin	4
Mentoring	4
Afterschool	14
Community Health	6

Economic Impact

Category	Total \$ Amount	Spending Breakdown by County				
		Alleghany	Ashe	Avery	Watauga	Wilkes
Local Wages	\$1,014,292	\$146,767	\$189,142	\$151,988	\$526,395	----
Local Business	\$282,455	\$3,020	\$7,829	\$53,364	\$120,979	\$97,263
Local Utilities/ Communication	\$22,491	---	\$11,265	\$9,881	---	\$1,345
Total	\$1,319,238	\$149,787	\$208,236	\$215,233	\$647,374	\$98,608

71% of WYN's \$1,859,000 operating expenses went to the local economy in 2024

hurricane response



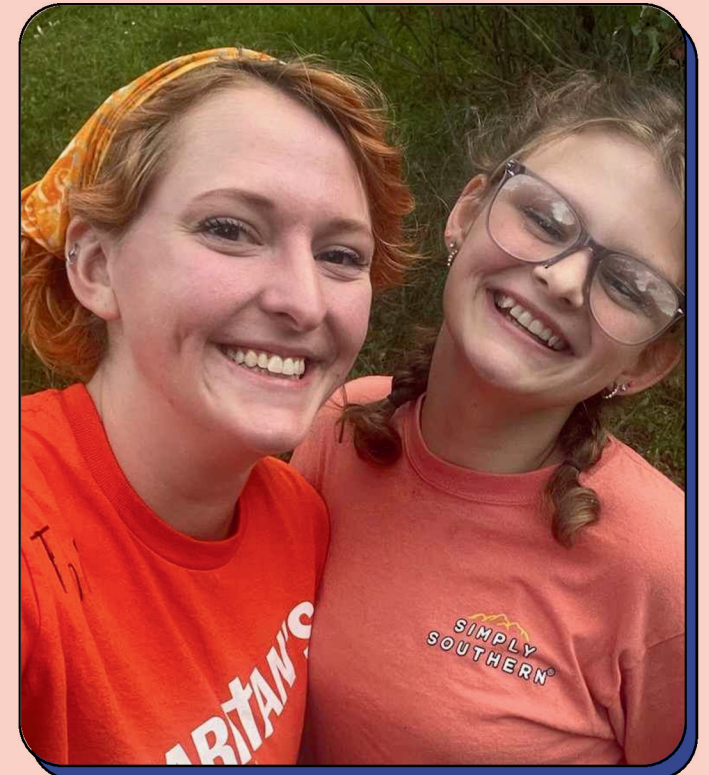
Though the bulk of this annual report will focus on WYN's overall programmatic impact throughout the past year, we also wanted to take a moment to **highlight our response** in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which changed so much for our community.

More often than not, WYN staff members are involved in many community efforts outside of their job descriptions including providing assistance to our WYN families in a variety of ways as needs arise. **Helping parents secure housing, connect to food resources, and obtain transportation** (vehicles, gas cards) in order to get to work are just a few examples of our team's extra efforts that became **an even more important part of our role following Helene.**

Immediately after the storm, once we had located our families and ensured they were safe, each of our staff members engaged in **recovery** — some focused on providing childcare while others focused on purchasing and/or delivering supplies, and many assisted with physical clean up efforts.

Our team members used (and are still using) **their community organizing skills, familiarity with the Appalachian mountain culture and knowledge of resilience skill building** to provide leadership in these recovery efforts.

Our **volunteers took on leadership roles as well.** One Avery County mentor-mentee pair (pictured right) worked tirelessly to help rebuild homes. Many mentoring matches volunteered to **assemble water filters** at **Wine to Water** as well (pictured on following page). All mentors were an invaluable source of emotional strength for children and families.





An Alleghany community partner, **Alleghany JAM**, immediately reached out to offer help post-hurricane. **With JAM's space, WYN facilitated drop in care for all children in Alleghany county at no cost.** Along with the help of volunteers, we provided care **for over 30 Alleghany children** the week after the hurricane.

Mount Jefferson Presbyterian Church was kind enough to open their doors to us in Ashe County, **enabling us to hold full day programming for 40 Ashe County children.** Multiple organizations helped provide lunches for our students every day of programming. Families were so grateful for the childcare support during this time and the children were beyond excited to be able to see their friends again and know that they were safe.

WYN's **Community Health** team took a leadership role in assisting all of WYN's communities in their recovery.

In one of the hardest hit areas, Lansing (**Ashe County**), Brittany Duncan from WYN's Community Health team took on a leadership role in that community's long road to rebuilding and recovering. She met with **Governor Roy Cooper** (pictured right) and Attorney General Josh Stein early in the aftermath when they visited Lansing. Brittany provided valuable insight regarding the most pressing long term recovery needs in addition to her community organizing and leadership. **Brittany was later invited to be part of Governor Josh Stein's Rebuilding Western NC Advisory Committee.**



Also in Ashe, Jessica Howard and the Ashe Youth Task Force began immediately filling the needs they saw among their neighbors. Jessica assisted with the shelter and supply distribution center at Ashe County High School. They ensured that the children seeking emergency shelter had **items that would offer them a sense of normalcy** and help mitigate the trauma they had experienced.

In **Avery County**, WYN Community Health Coordinator Tiffany Moon spent time assisting with **supply distribution efforts** at Newland Baptist Church, even in the wake of **losing her own home** in the flood waters.

Jonathan Sheppard, also on the Avery Community Health team, assisted initially with **search and rescue efforts**, and later moved to setting up distribution centers and community grant opportunities at Elk Park Christian Church.



Many Community Health team members, including Director Amber Dixon, have been engaged in **Long Term Recovery Groups**, leading the charge in resilience and recovery. The team also worked closely with FEMA volunteer agency liaisons as the county began creating the Long Term Recovery Groups to ensure that all sectors had representation and to help them identify key leaders within communities in Ashe, Watauga, and Avery.

Some of our Community Health team members even partnered with AppState's Center for Appalachian Studies to lead a **Rural Appalachia Cultural Competency Training for Federal Workers** (FEMA, Coast Guard, Red Cross, Public Health Service and the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, etc).

A photograph of a brick building with a green roof and a person's feet in the foreground. The building has a covered entrance with brick pillars. The foreground shows a person's feet in blue jeans and brown shoes walking on a paved surface. The background is filled with trees and a hillside.

Reflecting on 40 Years

*A NEW CHAPTER BEGINS AS WYN
CELEBRATES 40 YEARS OF SERVICE IN 2025*

In 2024, we closed out a chapter of WYN's history when we moved out of our Watauga office of over 30 years on WYN Way. At the end of the year we completed the transition of all Watauga administration and programming to the new headquarters on Doctors Drive in Boone.

Walking away on the eve of the anniversary of our 40th year felt symbolic — an ode to all we have done in the past and a nod to all that we will achieve together in the next 40 years.

alleghany

direct
service
stats

after school: 71 served
summer camp: 33 served

This year, WYN began offering afterschool programs at an additional location — **Glade Creek** school. Students in 3rd-8th grade at Piney Creek are now bussed to WYN's Sparta site, allowing us to serve **all 3 elementary schools in Alleghany**.

A new component of Glade Creek's afterschool program this year is **Homework Buddies**. Older students can choose between assisting a younger student with homework or receiving homework assistance from an adult.

One of our 3rd-grade girls loves to play "teacher" with her younger buddy and even gets them to willingly do extra "mini-lessons" that she creates!

Exploration of unique interests is also a facet of WYN's programming. Several students at Glade Creek were interested in **learning to sew**, so our staff purchased doll dress-making kits. After many frustrating attempts to thread a needle and with some help from our staff, the kids were able to sew a dress for a Barbie doll.



Our **Sparta afterschool** site has been working on **improved student literacy** and **collaboration with teachers**.

This site is located in the Sparta school cafeteria, making it easier for the WYN staff to speak with teachers to **address any academic challenges** the students may face. Our team is also working with the students to **establish positive homework and reading habits**.

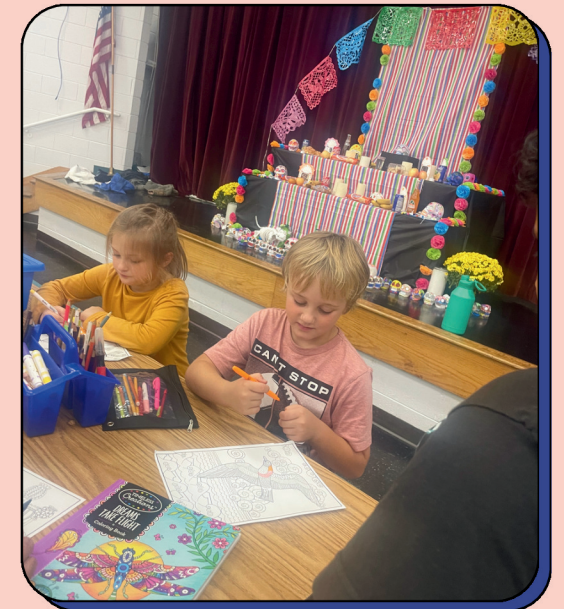


Regarding **literacy development**, the Sparta program continues to pair older students with younger students by listening to them read, practicing spelling and sight words, and reading to them. This, paired with a consistent schedule and checking in with students who are reluctant to ask for help has made students less resistant to doing homework.

Positive **community relationships** and **collaboration** are another major part of WYN's success. This year in **Allegheny**, we made **big strides in increasing those partnerships**.



- Our Sparta Afterschool staff joined our Community Health team on the **Allegheny Wellness Coalition** (AWC), a community effort dedicated to promoting mental and physical health and connecting people to resources.
- Our entire Allegheny team also attended **Allegheny's 10th Annual Back to School Bash** and Safety Night, at which any student in the county can access free school supplies and food. We distributed **15 medication lockboxes** and **3 medication disposal systems** (to prevent child access to medication), and **10 Operation Parent Handbooks** (which help parents/caregivers talk to children about technology, substance use and mental health).
- We were also excited to partner with Sparta school administrators to offer a **snow day/remote learning program** for the children of faculty. We hope it will expand in the future to include programming for our enrolled children on remote learning days as well.
- WYN's Community Health team and the Allegheny Youth Task Force partnered with Allegheny High School to create **"Building Opportunity Classrooms"** which offer a place for students to recenter and ground themselves, thereby **increasing their resiliency and healthy coping strategies**. These have been very popular so far with students.





ashe

direct
service
stats

afterschool: 63 served
summer camp: 45 served

Our **Ashe Afterschool** site enjoyed their second trip to Camp Don Lee on the **NC Coast for Spring Break 2024**. All students and staff were housed in one large cabin along the Neuse River, which created many opportunities for bonding. Away from the stressful routine of everyday life and cast into an unfamiliar setting, the kids really supported one another.

Our Ashe team also worked on creating **more neurodiverse activities** based on students' needs. After many days of problem solving, supervision, podcasts, and creating individual service plans, the team is grateful for all they have learned and feels that they are working toward an even more **well-rounded and inclusive program**.

Ashe also expanded their **counselor in training program** by welcoming 3 new seventh graders (5 total) into this role. These counselors are incredibly helpful to the WYN staff by offering homework help and planning club activities.



During **summer camp**, the Ashe team focused on local resources for new experiences. One of their favorites was a visit from a group of local bee farmers, **Ashe Beekeepers Society**, who taught our students about pollination, honey farming, and the life cycle of the honey bee. It was a great opportunity to connect with a local organization, and many of the students have visited the local honey store in West Jefferson after telling their parents.



As of the Fall of 2024, WYN's **Mentoring** program has **expanded to Ashe County!**

Having been established in Watauga since 1985, and Avery since 2002, we were excited to secure funding from the Ashe County Opioid Settlement Fund to expand our desperately needed program to Ashe Co. children.

WYN's **Ashe Community Health** team spent some of their time in 2024 building relationships with Ashe County school social workers to build **Calm Corners** in Ashe County schools and Ashe Early College. These classrooms offer a space for students to feel grounded and calm and also have supplies for students who may need them (snacks, school supplies, and other hygiene items).

Our Community Health team also participated in the **Ashe Mental Health Fest & Resilience for Arts Event** for Ashe middle and high school students and put together **resiliency kits for students** and teachers to be able to **center** themselves and **recharge** throughout the day.



In total, our Community Health team distributed in Ashe: **130 Lock Your Meds materials** (encourages caregivers to secure and inventory their medications), **163 medication lockboxes**, and **56 medication disposal systems**, all to ensure children cannot access medications in the home.

SURVIVE AND THRIVE IN ASHE

YOU MATTER • YOU ARE NOT ALONE • HELP IS AVAILABLE

ASK A QUESTION, SAVE A LIFE

A quick-reference guide to help yourself and others in crisis and to help achieve access to wellness services

SIGNS OF SERIOUS DISTRESS:

- Sad or irritable mood.
- Impulsivity.
- Talk of death or escaping.
- References to being worthless.
- Binge drinking or using substances to cope on more than one occasion in a short time period.
- Covert communications about suffering (essays, missing classes or work, Facebook/social media status).
- Behaviors like saying goodbyes or giving away possessions.
- Major change in mood, appetite, sleep, academic or work performance, and social relationships.
- A recent and identifiable trigger or a long standing hopelessness.
- Withdrawal or social isolation.

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL THINGS YOU CAN DO:

Show compassion to yourself...allow yourself to feel what you're feeling without judgment.
Call someone...talk about how you feel and ask for what you need.
Get connected...ask someone to lunch or coffee. To join you for an activity, join a club or organization, volunteer.
Relax...take a warm bath, read a good book, play with pets.
Take care of your body...eat healthy foods, sleep.
Write in a journal...organize your thoughts and write out your dreams and hopes for your future.
Exercise...walk, bike, run, join club sports.
Structure your day...keep yourself on track and connected, spend time with people who support you.
Distraction yourself...listen to music, read, draw, color, journal.

If you are worried about another person, remember ASHE:

- A Approach and acknowledge**- Tolerate your own anxiety and awkwardness. Be specific about what you notice. (*You seem distressed, I've noticed x, y, z*)
- S Show Compassion**- Show that you care by asking questions. (*Are you thinking about suicide?*)
- H Help is available**- Listen and let the person know that help is available, things can get better, and they are not alone.
- E Encourage and engage**- Share referrals with the person. Form a safety net of support and share with support network (*friends, family, mentors*).

THRIVE cards distributed: 469
(pictured above)

Catch My Breath* participants: 220

*Evidence-Based Youth Vaping Prevention Program





direct
service
stats

549 volunteer mentor hours
15 children served
20 children waiting for mentor

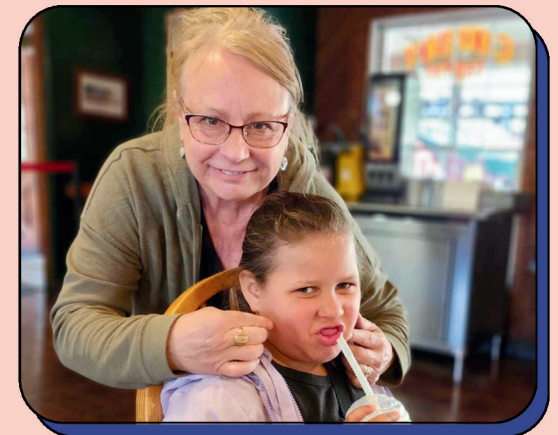
WYN's Mentoring program relies heavily on and creates a sense of community — which has never been more important than this past year. The **Avery Mentoring program** provided much **stability to children** who experienced unimaginable loss and who were without their normal outlets since school was closed for so long. Separated from friends and other safe adults, WYN stepped into the gap and provided mentorship.

We are also happy to have a **partnership with Crossnore Communities for Children** to provide safe volunteer mentors to youth who have not always had consistent adult role models.



WYN's Avery County office may be small, but it plays a vital role as a **community hub** for families and community members. The site has **clothing and school supplies**, information about local and national resources, and even serves as a pick-up site for the **local Food Hub**. They are proud to be a space where families can connect and find the support they need.

Our team has also **completed various trainings** to stay up-to-date on youth mental health, ensuring we know how to **best support our youth** and assist mentors during a time when mental health challenges are becoming more prevalent among young people.

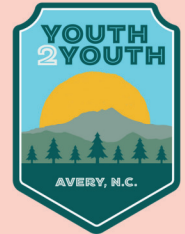


Our **Community Health** efforts in Avery County are focused more on direct services than in our other counties thanks to **Youth2Youth (Y2Y)**. This program meets once a week with middle schoolers to engage in self-advocacy and encourage substance use prevention. During their time together they participate in fun activities and offer tangible ways to cope with relevant teen issues.



This year, Y2Y hosted two free events — a Middle School Kick off and the 2nd Annual **After Prom Party**. They rented a portable roller rink and provided music, pizza, drinks, and free t-shirts. Between the two events, they had **100 students in attendance**. These types of events offer a fun, safe environment for youth to interact with one another.

Last summer, Avery Y2Y programming took place at the YMCA facility, focusing on providing a safe space to hang out with peers and develop resiliency skills. The youth also wanted to start a program called “we got your back” where other middle schoolers can **anonymously submit a need** they have and then the teens will **work together to address that need**.



Avery Y2Y attended the **CADCA (Community Anti Drug Coalitions of America) Conference in Chicago!** This was a great experience for the youth to see a new city and learn more about the **policy work** that goes into creating healthy, drug free communities. Thanks to a grant, they were able to stay an extra day in Chicago to **sightsee** and visit museums.



watauga

direct
service
stats

afterschool: 62 served
summer camp: 41 served

The **Watauga Afterschool Program** continued to **provide additional programming hours** during snow days, teacher workdays, and over Spring Break during 2024. This resulted in **144 additional programming hours** last year.

The biggest shift the Watauga program experienced in 2024 was the **loss of our building** of over 30 years due to hurricane damage. The sudden goodbye tested the resiliency of our staff and kids. Students have since reminisced about the fun times they had and the positive relationships they built at our old building.



It has been a **great reminder that WYN is not just a place**, but a group of youth and caring adults that have **created a culture of resilience and joy together**.

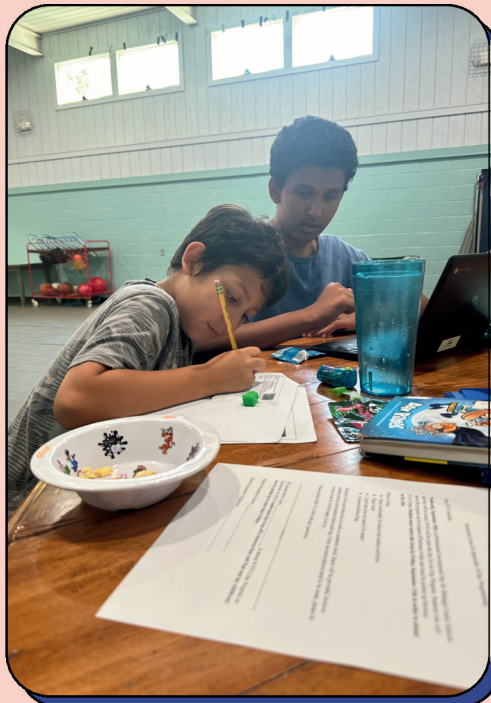
As they continue to feel this loss, it is now our focus to gift these students a **new recreational space** and serve more Watauga County students than ever before.

We continuously try to **meet every student where they are every day**, no matter where that is. We also do our best to work collaboratively with parents, guardians, and caregivers in order to **support other adults in our students' lives**. This takes many forms including working collaboratively with the entire family on conflicts within the home, academic support, or just being a listening ear.





Our staff are open to allowing students to determine a lot of programming and how they spend their time at WYN. This always looks different based on the group of students enrolled. Sometimes it means having an impromptu fashion show on the last day of summer camp; sometimes it means having a designated “Cruise Club” that involves riding around with your favorite people and singing at the top of your lungs.



Summer Camp in 2024, as in other years, was an incredible experience for our youth.

Many of our summer camp participants have never gotten to explore the amazing place in which they live, so summer is filled with **adventure activities** and a ton of time outdoors. It is also filled with a lot of challenges and **opportunities for growth**. Not only are students pushing themselves physically, they are pushing themselves out of their comfort zones to **try something new**, talk to new people, and build incredibly important **friendships**.





Watauga Mentoring partnered with local artists as well as the Watauga County Arts Council to participate in community art work. Our mentoring students contributed to **two separate art installation projects** with two different artists. The projects utilized mixed media and worked to demonstrate our **shared experiences** while recognizing that we all have different gifts.

One art installation was done by local artist Andi Gelsthorpe. **WYN Mentoring** and **WYN's Watauga Afterschool** were asked to help with the project. Youth joined together to rip pieces of fabric and share their **positive intentions of why community is important to them**. All of the participants seemed to relax and enjoy the cathartic feeling of working with a community to create a shared project. Some WYN youth and mentors were able to attend the installation of the labyrinth and experience their creation.



Another 2024 highlight was when Watauga Mentor, Kevin Patterson, was awarded the **2024 Mentor of the Year Award** from the NC Mentoring Collaborative. Kevin has been mentoring Kody for **over a decade** and he has encouraged him to find his path. Kody will be **graduating** this spring and is planning to attend a 4 year college.



*direct
service
stats*

3,397 volunteer mentor hours
83 children served
56 children waiting for mentor

47% of WYN's mentoring matches have been together for over 2 years.
94.5% of mentees said their relationship with their mentor is important to them.
100% of mentees said they feel comfortable talking with a mentor about their feelings.





Did you know that WYN also has **school based mentoring**? One of our school-based mentoring matches (pictured left) has been together for over 4 years — since the student was in second grade. We asked the student if she knew that she and her mentor had been together for such a long time, and she very nonchalantly answered, **“well...we just love each other.”** Funny thing is, the mentor always wants us to check with the student at the beginning of each year because she thinks that the student may be getting “too old” for her to come in and have lunch.

WYN Mentors are superstars; they don’t just spend one hour per week with their mentee. They also take them to dance recitals, attend their plays and birthday parties, make treats for them to take to school on birthdays and so much more.

Angela McMann with WYN’s Mentoring team leads our holiday angel tree program every year. Last year was the **largest angel tree initiative** we have experienced, with over **100 youth receiving gifts**.

The community poured out their generosity to **ensure that children had what they needed and wanted for the holidays** and also that families had propane heaters, gift cards for gas and food, extra warm clothing, household supplies and diapers.







WYN partners with fellow non-profit agency, **Watauga Housing Council (WHC)** to address our local lack of housing, particularly affordable housing, for our families, children and other residents in Watauga County. In 2024, WHC attended the NC Chamber of Commerce “Building NC Conference” in Raleigh. WHC members brought back information that they can use to support their local efforts.

Watauga Housing Council also participated in Watauga’s Back 2 School Fest (B2SF), hosted to provide families with the resources they need to help their children start school successfully. At the B2SF, Watauga Housing Council representatives gathered **175 surveys** from residents about their **experiences with housing in Watauga County**. This type of data collection helps inform future initiatives and interventions.

WYN’s Community Health team was also on hand at the Back 2 School Fest to **disseminate helpful information and materials to our community**.

Our team spoke to over 450 individuals and distributed **420 Lock Your Meds Materials**, **262 Medication Lockboxes**, and **262 Medication Disposal Systems**.

Another important way WYN keeps children safe is by ensuring adults know how to respond to a child in a mental health crisis. One of WYN’s Community Health staff members is trained to lead **Youth Mental Health First Aid trainings** and she provided this training for many of our staff members last year. This is yet another helpful tool to have that prioritizes the safety and well-being of our children.





WYN's Community Health team continued to partner with **Wilkes Youth Life Development (WYLD)** for outreach and services in Wilkes County. This organization is similar to WYN and includes both direct service and community well-being initiatives.



WYLD hosted their **first Lead Appalachia Youth Conference** in the summer of 2024 in North Wilkesboro, which was attended by WYN's Avery Youth2Youth group. This event focused on **empowering young people** through **substance use prevention, mental health advocacy, and leadership development**. It is open to any rising 7th through rising 12th grade youth in NC. Our students who attended left with skills and resources they can use to address the challenges that are unique to rural communities. They are ready to become the **future leaders of the Appalachian region**.







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

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raise a community.**

*Use your talents and
resources to make a
difference in a
child's life.*

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