The comprehensive work of Project Legacy strives to address a range of inextricably linked issues that deeply impact the outcomes of low-income youth and young adults of color in our community. These outcomes have negative effects not only on the individual lives of at-risk youth, but also on peers, families, and ultimately, the health and stability of our larger community and workforce. Project Legacy youth confront several challenges, including, multigenerational poverty, trauma, homelessness, mental illness, chemical-dependency, incarceration, and gang-affiliation, among others. Of our currently enrolled youth, 90% have family members who are incarcerated; 70% have experienced long-term homelessness; 60% were on probation; 75% have gang-affiliated family members or were gang-affiliated themselves. Thirty of these youth are enrolled in college, fifteen are in high school, and sixty are in outreach.

While Rochester, MN is an affluent town within Olmsted County, in 2013 the Rochester Public School system was tracking 350 homeless children and youth within elementary, middle, and high schools in the district.  Poverty rates for the county’s Black and African-American population is 39.7%. According to the 2007-2011 American Community Survey, 3,494 children (9.8%) in Olmsted County are living in poverty. Moreover, it is estimated that the percentage of the county’s youth of color living in poverty is as high as 21%. Youth of color who grow up in poverty face major institutional, economic, and even psychological obstacles to reaching their full potential and building a safe future for themselves and their children.

Through outreach, building protective factors, capacity building, and partnerships, Project Legacy’s model ensures that participating youth can create a positive legacy for their future.  Institutions like the public school, social services and foster care systems have been under resourced to fully support at-risk youth and meet their complex needs at varying stages of their development. Project Legacy’s interventions include restorative work with the public school, criminal justice, and social service systems in which many of the root causes of generational poverty, systemic racism, and developmental trauma may be under-addressed or even exacerbated.

Project Legacy conducts active outreach to at-risk youth in Rochester through social media, community connections, and the development of ‘Healing Circles’.  Following the Homeboy Model from Los Angeles, CA, we offer caring support, basic needs, resources, connections, and empowerment, while demanding sobriety. We work hard to close the opportunity gap our youth face by fundraising locally for essential needs, including food and housing, as well as college fees and supplies. In the past eight years, our program has touched the lives of 300 youth and successfully mentored many of them through the pursuit of higher education or vocational training. Our program keeps expanding and our successful youth have started to return as active contributors and leaders, increasing our credibility with their younger peers and “paying it forward”. Most of the youth now self-refer to us through word of mouth. We have gained the recognition of the Rochester Public School system and criminal justice system and are increasingly approached for help with difficult cases.

Project Legacy’s organizational leadership have backgrounds in education and social work with expertise in racial disparities. We have established a network of collaborators among local professionals and formed valuable partnerships with community organizations and institutions.  We have mobilized a network of funders and individual supporters across 14 different states who actively contribute to the ongoing needs of our youth with an estimated annual contribution of $50,000 dollars. We have received funding from the Mayo Clinic Foundation, US Bancorp, and in 2017 received funding through the State of Minnesota’s Equity grant. We have now reached the point where our local resources and staff are stretched to the limit and we are unable to meet the demand for our services. With state funding, we can ensure the sustainability of our program and continue to support youth who come to us seeking help as well as expanding our outreach programs. By helping at risk youth make the transition from street to school we believe that we directly make a meaningful contribution to society by breaking multi-generational cycles of poverty and creating a new legacy for future generations.

***Project Outreach & Activities***

Project Legacy works with low-income youth of color who are extremely high-risk and are not otherwise served by existing community organizations and charities in Rochester. The project is structured around the continued growth and sustainability of four distinct program areas. Project Legacy has developed these areas over the last eight years to include:

1. *Operation Outreach* which engages with high-risk youth to establish trust and ignite hope.
2. *Pathways to College* intensively supports and mentors students through the higher education process.
3. *Operation Nourish* provides nutritious food, purchased by volunteers for our youth every other week; provides cooking and nutrition classes and operates a food shelf.
4. *Operation Encourage* supports Project Legacy college and high school students through monthly care packages.
5. *Chemical Dependency Intervention* assists youth in accessing treatment and provides emotional and material support as they progress through treatment and after-care.

  Most of the youth in Project Legacy have histories of complex trauma and many have never received counseling for this trauma. Project Legacy works with the youth to obtain necessary treatment and then provides the structure and support for them to follow through with counseling and recommended services. Dr. Amit Sood and his colleagues will engage the youth in a longitudinal in-person resilience program customized to help mitigate their trauma.

 In addition, because of histories of neglect and abuse, the majority of our youth have great difficulty trusting adults who can assist them. For this reason, Project Legacy recognizes that outreach must be intensive and flexible. We also recognize that because our youth do not have reliable support systems, we must provide this intensive level of support until they are able to be self-reliant.  This support might include basic needs such as food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and financial assistance.