

NY LOCAL



Guiding light for homeless teens

Think about homeless teenagers in the city, and an image usually springs from the movies: An innocent waif stepping off a bus at the Port Authority, awed and eventually consumed by the big city.

That's some, but not most of the teen homeless population of 2008, said Bruce Henry, executive director of Covenant House New York.

"There are kids who still come here that way," Henry said. "But 80 to 85% of the homeless teens in the city are from the five boroughs. There are still a large number of them from out of state, but most of them are from the five boroughs."

Henry should know. Last year, 8,000 teens/young adults used Covenant House New York's various services. Most were between 18 and 21.

Most have two things in common: poverty and the foster care system.

"These kids come from situations where they have struggled for a long time," Henry said.

"They had poor housing, had poor schooling. Many read at a fifth-grade level. The largest single group is former foster care kids. Obviously, they have been living in unstable situations and struggling for a long time."

The 30-year-old Covenant House provides a wealth of services to the homeless teenager/young adult. The crisis center in midtown Manhattan provides food, clothing and shelter 24 hours a day, with no questions asked on the first visit, Henry said.

But even then the work of finding a permanent solution has begun.

"Within 72 hours, three days, they have a plan," Henry said. "How are they going to get employment? What are their educational needs? We are constantly saying to them this [living at Covenant House] is a temporary situation. What is your next step?"

The Rights of Passage Program provides transitional housing for some 160 people who are allowed to live at the center for 12 to 18 months.

There are education, vocational, counseling and legal services, a health clinic and day care for women with children.

Last year Covenant House's jobs program, run out of the group's Regional Training Center in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, helped some 80 kids a month find jobs with more than 400 companies in the city, ranging from mom-and-pop businesses hiring one person to corporations like the Gap.

"The idea behind Rights of Passage is that kids have a right to certain types of

opportunities," Henry said. "That's why we invest heavily in employment and training."

The group also maintains a job bank that anyone accepted into the program can access – even after they leave Covenant House, Henry said.

"The reason we emphasize work is not that the kids don't have lots of other problems. They might have been abused, might have a drug problem, might have been thrown out that night.

"But at the age they are, if they can't work, they're never going to have a future," Henry explained. "We tell them that the only way you're even going to get time to take care of these other problems is to get a job so you can take care of yourself."

Covenant House New York is in the midst of a 30 Days for 30 Nights campaign aimed at raising \$300,000 by March 6 to be used to house homeless teens this winter.

Contributions can be made online at: https://www.covenanthouseny.org/supporters_sponsors_donate_online.asp, by calling (212) 613-0300 or by mail at Covenant House New York, Attn: Funding and Development Department, 460 W.41st St., New York, N.Y. 10036.