Funding hope for youths

Federal grant aids shelter for teenagers

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Staff Writer

BRIDGEWATER — A shelter for homeless and runaway teenagers has been awarded a major federal grant to help it meet an increasing need.

The announcement of the $150,000 grant was made Monday by Rep. Mike Ferguson, R-Warren, during a tour of the 30-year-old organization, the Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children. The facility each year provides shelter, education and counseling for about 130 to 180 teens ages 13 through 18.

The grant is from the Department of Health and Human Services through the federal Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children Protection Act.

"We've never had such a high demand," Executive Director Jeffrey Fetzko said. "The phone is ringing off the hook."

Fetzko said the shelter turned away about 200 referrals last year, about half of which were candidates for its services. The other half were not considered candidates for various reasons, including because the cases involved children who needed psychiatric care.

He said the need has increased because other types of substitute care facilities — such as foster care, group homes and residential schools — are strapped for operating funds. There also is a lack of organization among social service groups that serve homeless and runaway teenagers.

The teenagers who fall through the cracks turn up on the doorstep of the shelter, sometimes quite literally, as a result of a new law that allows teenagers to seek shelter without their parents' consent.

The runaways often come to the shelter via the police, who may pick them up on interstate highways.

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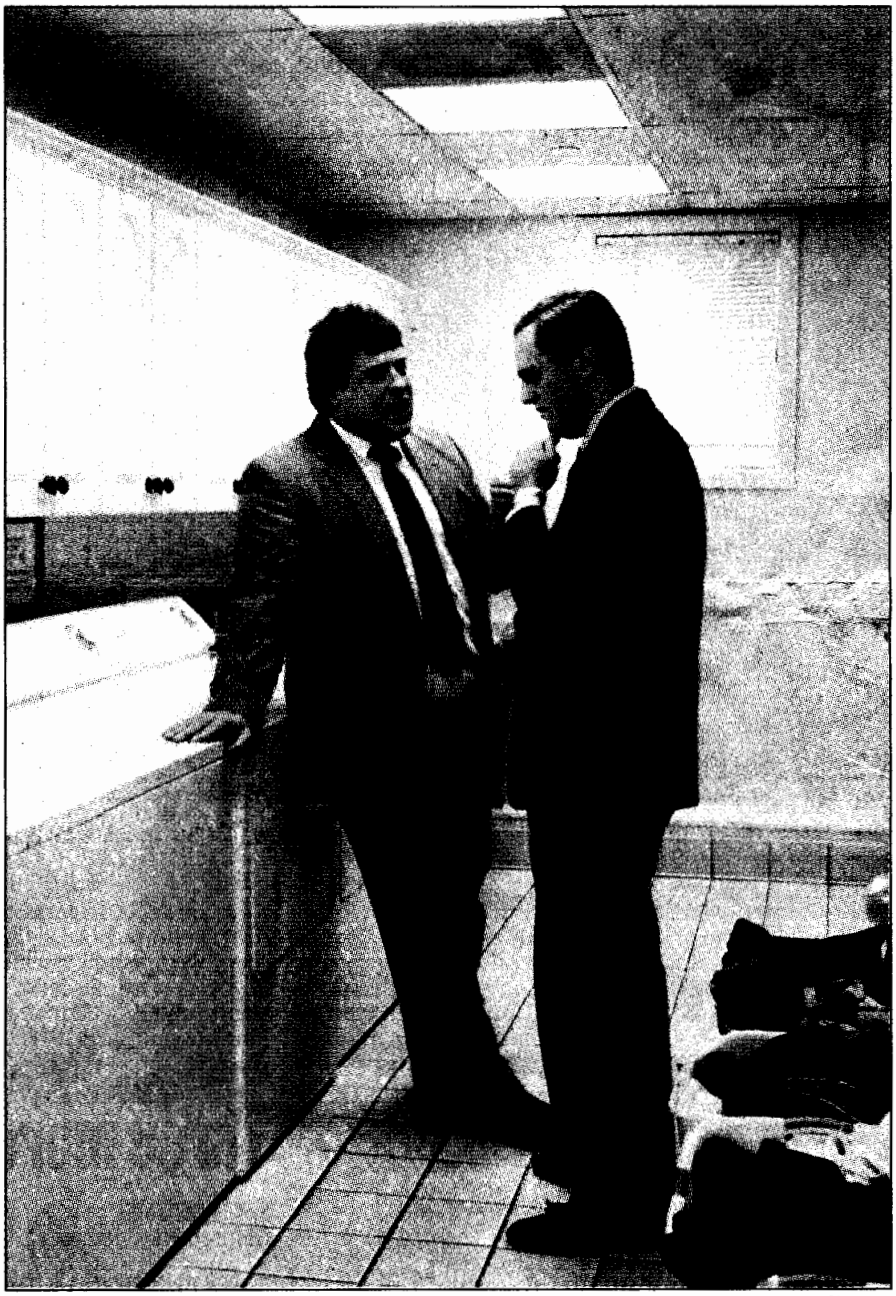

STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY JOHNSON

Congressman Mike Ferguson, right, and Jeffrey Fetzko, executive director of the Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children, find a quiet place to talk Monday at the Bridgewater shelter.

Shelter

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"The last thing the police want to do is start negotiating the network of social services, so they refer them here," Fetzko said. "Our first goal is to provide safety and security; our second goal is to transition them to a stable place."

The kids are homeless or neglected, with parents who may be drug abusers, alcoholics, jail inmates or child abusers.

In addition to the police, they come to the shelter from the Division of Youth and Family Services, the court system and other sources.

The average stay is a month, although teens have stayed for as long as a year.

"There are as many reasons for their being here and as many places that they end up as there are children," said Tracey Costanzo, communications manager.

She added the goal is to reunite the teenagers with their families. More than one-third of the youths return to their families with continued services, such as family counseling.

The home can accommodate 16 teenagers, who sleep four to a room in double bunk beds in the well-kept facility at 49 Brahma Ave., the site of the former Bradley Gardens Firehouse. They do their own laundry, pitch in on chores and cooking and may attend school on the premises or in the public schools.

In addition to the shelter, the Somerset organization also runs "Passages" — a transitional housing facility with 10 beds for 16- to 21-year-olds that helps young adults get on their feet — and a street outreach van that provides services to about 50 homeless youth ages 13 to 21 annually by visiting the places where they spend time.

The street outreach program staff may cruise the food court at the mall, for instance, where mall security alerts them to kids who have been hanging out too long.

Or they may respond to calls from parents about "couch surfers," teenagers who go from one friend or relative's house to another's in search of shelter.

The program, called Street S.M.A.R.T. (Somerset Mobile Adolescent Resource Team), is targeted at adolescents who are living on the street or in other unsafe environments and are at risk for sexual abuse and exploitation.

"The street outreach program gives them whatever they feel comfortable accepting, whether it's blankets, clothes or a meal," said Anne Bradley, associate executive director. "Some might not want to come in to the shelter."

During his tour, Ferguson, a former high-school history teacher in the Bronx, interrupted the children's literature class for a lesson in the workings of government.

About nine teens ranging in age from 14 to 17 — all but one of them girls — listened intently to his talk in the facility's schoolroom.

Their interest was not unusual. One benefit of working with the children, according to the staff, is their responsiveness. Although some are withdrawn, the majority are so emotionally needy that they eagerly respond to any attention, a fact evident at Monday's event.

"Here's a great organization helping to give you a shot," Ferguson said.

"To give you an opportunity that you wouldn't have had otherwise. This is a chance for you to be successful," he said, urging them to "keep reading and to work hard. Getting a good, solid education is one of the most important things you'll ever do."

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At a glance

Here are some stories of teenagers who recently found refuge at the shelter. The stories were provided by staff members.

◆ One girl was sexually molested from age 3 to 5 by her mother's boyfriend's father. When the mother accidentally discovered this by walking in on them, she was so devastated that she committed suicide by jumping off a highway overpass. The girl then went to live with an abusive aunt, who eventually called the Division of Youth and Family Services and asked them to take her away.

"She cried every day all day for months and months," said Jessica Jordan, director of the shelter. "She needed a lot of therapy."

The girl now has a boyfriend and is thinking about going to college.

◆ A Somerset County teenager returned home one day to find his family had moved out of the house without warning, leaving him to fend for himself.

It turned out the family had moved to a condo that wasn't large enough to accommodate him. He is now in an independent-living program.

◆ One girl's mother spent all her time drinking in bars, and her father was neglectful. A fire broke out in their apartment, which killed the young Somerset County teen's brother and scarred her.

After that, the father abandoned the family, and the girl ended up at the shelter. She now is living in a foster home.

◆ Another boy was dropped off in the shelter's parking lot by his mother with what Executive Director Jeffrey Fetzko called "shelter luggage:" two black plastic garbage bags full of belongings.

His mother drove off so fast she left a track of rubber on the pavement.

◆ About 50 percent of the children at the shelter come from Somerset County, with the communities of Franklin, Hillsborough, Manville, Bound Brook and Somerville being most heavily represented, the staff said.

However, the children may come from anywhere, and the shelter has served kids from all over the country.

Courier News - 9/15/03 - Bridgewater, NJ