

Group helping homeless Tri-City teens

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By Michelle Dupler

You won't find homeless teens in the Tri-Cities huddled under bridges or in bus shelters.

You won't find them camped in a park or sipping coffee to stay warm at a community center.

And you definitely won't find them at the homeless shelter in Pasco, because only adults can stay there, unless it's a mom with kids.

In fact, you might have a hard time finding them at all because there's no designated place a homeless teen can go to spend the night, unless police intervene.

That information shocked a group of about a dozen Tri-Citians who visited a youth homeless shelter in Spokane last week.

The trip was organized by the Housing Research and Action Team at Riverview United Methodist Church in Pasco. HouseRATs, as the group calls itself, formed about a year ago to research homelessness in the Tri-Cities.

"We found in the Tri-Cities that youth homelessness was not recognized and addressed," said Merrie Crawford, one of the HouseRATs.

So she and others from her congregation decided to do something about it, starting by enlisting the help of other people.

Mark Lee, executive director of Vista Youth Center in Kennewick, had been to some of the same community meetings Crawford attended, and like her was frustrated there was no safe place for teens to spend the night.

"Every time we were hearing the same thing, 'We need to do something,' " Lee said. "But no action was taken."

He was particularly interested in the issue because of a statistic he read in a report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force that as many as 40 percent of homeless youth identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.

He'd heard stories from kids at the youth center, which is intended to give LGBT teens a safe place to hang out, about how conflict with their families over coming out drove them from home.

Vista Youth Center is open three evenings a week to kids of any background or orientation, and it attracts both gay and straight teens, Lee said. The common thread is a feeling that they don't belong, of being an outsider in their own families.

It breaks Lee's heart each time he knows one of the youth center kids is going home to abuse or neglect, or not going home at all and spending the night on someone's couch or on the streets.

He hopes by working with the HouseRATs he can expand the center's mission to include a drop-in overnight shelter, like the one operated by Crosswalk in Spokane.

The Tri-Cities has a shelter for runaways in Kennewick called EPIC, which stands for Enterprise for Progress in the Community. But teens can't check themselves in -- they have to be brought in by a police officer.

Crosswalk, by contrast, allows a teen to walk in at any time of night and find a hot meal and a bed waiting.

Shelter Supervisor Craig Hirt said the primary goal is to reunite teens with their families or get them into foster care. If that isn't the best option, Crosswalk has other programs to help teens to learn independent living skills, get a high school degree, and get into transitional housing or apartments.

"The person who really drives the boat is the youth themselves," Hirt said.

But first the kids have to walk through the door.

"For some youth, it's very scary for them to come through the door," Hirt said. "With some they don't spend the night right away and we may not do a full intake right away. It might be, 'Here's a bowl of soup. How are you doing?' With some it might just be, 'Here's a bowl of soup.' "

The intake involves asking teens questions about why they're homeless, and explaining that Crosswalk staff members are required to report things like abuse to Child Protective Services. Shelter staff also are required to call police to find out if the teen is reported as a runaway, and to get permission from a parent or guardian for the teen to spend the night if possible.

The number one reason Crosswalk teens report for being homeless is family conflict. School problems, drug and alcohol use, violence at home and mental health issues also often are factors, Hirt said.

Once teens are on the street, they quickly learn to go into survival mode.

"Which means they don't do long-term planning," Hirt said. "They don't set goals that are two years out. They set a goal of, 'How am I going to get food tonight? How am I going to get shelter? How am I going to stay alive?' "

Crosswalk CEO Marilee Roloff said the shelter starts by meeting those basic survival needs and builds trust from there.

"In everyone's heart of heart, everyone wants to be cared for. Everyone," Roloff said. "But you've got to let down a lot of barriers first."

The HouseRATs are looking at other models for a youth shelter, including Cocoon House in Everett. But they're far from ready to build something. First, they have to decide what it is they want to create. Then they need money.

Meanwhile, they're keeping the conversation going. They'll meet again at the church, 4012 Court St., Pasco, at 7 p.m. April 15 and hope others will come.

"It's going to take partnership," Crawford said. "It's really just in the last couple of months that we decided to make the jump and really talk about doing it."

