

themorningcall.com

Valley Youth House has earned respect

April 18, 2008

Valley Youth House will observe its 35th anniversary tomorrow. It was originally a short-term shelter and counseling service for homeless or runaway children and teens. Now, this home-grown agency offers a variety of programs to thousands of young people and families and has become an important part of the Lehigh Valley's social safety net.

Since the first teenager walked into its Eighth Avenue shelter in Bethlehem on April 19, 1973, it has helped 100,000 adolescents. Last year, 9,000 youth, most of whom were residents of the Lehigh Valley, were helped.

Valley Youth House's programs are conducted throughout the Lehigh Valley. It offers counseling and prevention programs; maintains shelters in Bethlehem, Bucks County and elsewhere; and runs Camp Fowler in Orefield. Many of the children it serves get counseling to deal with serious mental health or family issues. Mentors provide at-risk children with stable adult role models. It also assists entire families as they cope with substance abuse and other serious problems. Valley Youth House supports drug-prevention programs in more than 60 schools and offers other prevention programs to reduce harassment, underage drinking and behavioral problems.

Residential programs still are a big part of Valley Youth House, as well. About 220 children and teens who were abused or homeless sleep in its shelters each night. There also are more than 100 apartments where teens live with counselors and learn to be responsible adults.

And, Camp Fowler, its 41-acre camp, provides education and recreation for more than 8,000 troubled adolescents each year. Its outdoor and recreation activities are designed to lessen their chances of becoming involved with drugs, gangs and crime.

The growing organization says there's still more to accomplish. Last year, 108 children were turned away from its shelters because there was no room. And, some counseling programs are serving fewer children because of reduced public funding. For instance, its program to assist victims of sexual abuse was cut by 49 percent.

The problems facing children are serious and seem to be growing. About 1,100 Lehigh Valley high school students drop out each year. More than 16,000 Lehigh Valley children are living under the poverty line. And more than 600 Allentown School District students are homeless. More than ever, Valley Youth House depends on private philanthropy to balance its \$12.7 million budget.

Its record over the past 35 years more than demonstrates that Valley Youth House has earned the trust, and deserves the support, of people and businesses in the Lehigh Valley.

Copyright © 2008, The Morning Call