

For Immediate Release



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Editor's Note: This is the first of a three-part series about the Union County Youth Shelter.

UNION COUNTY YOUTH SHELTER OFFERS OPTIONS TO AT-RISK AND TROUBLED YOUTH

Shelter offers safety from troubled homes and alternative to detention

Elizabeth, NJ – February 16, 2012 – A jigsaw puzzle sits half-finished upon the table within the Union County Youth Shelter. On any given day four young people at crucial points in their adolescence try to fit the pieces of their lives into a picture that offers a brighter future than the one they faced when entering the facility.

They come to the shelter from alternate paths. Some are referred by the Family Crisis Intervention Unit of the Union County Youth Services Bureau. Others are ordered to the shelter by the juvenile justice system rather than being sent to the Union County Juvenile Detention Center.

All the youths who come want to be there, some more so than others. All have problems and believe being in the shelter will help – although again, some more than others.

Sadiel is a 16-year-old who has been at the shelter for 20 days. He was picked up in violation of probation after leaving school, a requirement after an earlier arrest. He wants to finish high school and play football for Ohio State University while earning a degree in business.

“That’s if I’m not locked up,” he said.

Joseph, a 17-year-old, has been at the shelter for 65 days. He also is in violation of probation after a number of earlier mistakes. He hopes to finish trade school and start his own plumbing business.

“(The shelter) keeps me out of trouble for the most part,” Joseph said. “But honestly, I think I’m better off on my own. I already planned my future as long as I stick with school.”

Despite such occasional doubt and stubbornness, their time at the shelter is making a difference, according to Julia Leftwich, a director at Community Access Unlimited (CAU), which runs the shelter for Union County.

“Many will see they’re being given a second chance,” she said. “The counselors will try to get them to see how the decisions they made got them here and how they have to make better decisions. The hope is they will go home and implement the skills they have learned here.”

CAU has been running the Union County Youth Shelter since 2006. The facility serves as transitional housing for youths aged 13-17, up to four at a time. After their stay at the shelter the youths are directed by Family Crisis or the courts into residential housing, treatment if there is a substance abuse issue, home or, if deemed necessary by the court, the Union County Juvenile Detention Center.

While at the shelter a staff of 13 plus a teacher provide independent living skills, counseling, on-site schooling by a state-certified teacher or at the youth’s home school, family counseling and, if necessary, intervention.

CAU is the ideal human services organization to run the shelter, according to Tanya Johnson, senior assistant executive director of youth services at the agency. CAU serves people with disabilities and at-risk youth, providing housing support and life-skills training to enable them to live independently in the community.

"We already were in the business of helping children with shelter and training," Johnson said. "We also run dozens of programs and own more than 200 residential properties throughout Union County so we know how to run a shelter and provide the services these young people require."

The Union County courts agree. In a letter praising CAU's operation of the shelter, Superior Court Judge Robert Kirsch stated, "In Union County there is a critical need for this facility, and the work of the Youth Shelter contributes greatly to enabling the otherwise vulnerable juveniles in (the court's) care to lead independent lives and be productive members of society."

There are serious hurdles the youths themselves must clear before that goal is achieved.

"I got anger issues," Sadiel said. "My mom and my dad, I get it from both of them. They're tough people. I take it out on other people... I just got street issues. If I feel disrespected I act in a bad way which causes (me) to hurt people."

"I got anger issues," Joseph echoed. "I got bipolar disorder. I was in Trinitas for (attempting) suicide. My dad said I tried to hurt myself (but) that was a bold-faced lie. They diagnosed me for schizophrenia. They put me on pills and that messed me up."

Yet Leftwich and Johnson see the youths living at the shelter making progress toward a more promising future. When pressed, Joseph and Sadiel agree.

"I learned patience," Joseph said. "I learned how to use my time to my advantage. I learned how to deal with people in general. I learned how to share things, because I'm not really big in sharing. I let some good colors show out."

"This place helps me think about the bad things I did and the good things I did," Sadiel said. "I think about home and being detained and incarcerated and being away from the community and that's not good for me. I think about being on the streets and being around people I know are bad for me. It's a good thing the judge sent me here."

"I actually like it. When I got here I thought I was going to run away. But I like it. Sometimes I like it here better than being home. I'm around people I can talk to...The staff, they cool your head."

Next: A look at the benefits of the shelter to the community.

About CAU

Community Access Unlimited (CAU), celebrating its 33rd anniversary in 2012, supports people with special needs in achieving real lives in the community. CAU provides support and gives a voice to adults and youth who traditionally have had little support and no voice in society. CAU helps people with housing, life skills, employment, money management, socialization and civic activities. CAU also supports opportunities for advocacy through training in assertiveness, decision-making and civil rights. CAU serves more than 5,000 individuals each year. For more information about CAU and its services, contact us by phone at 908.354.3040, online at www.caunj.org or by mail at 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202.

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UNION COUNTY YOUTH SHELTER OFFERS OPTIONS TO COURTS AND YOUTH SERVICES

Shelter offers alternative to detention and safety from troubled homes

Elizabeth, NJ – February 16, 2012 – In Linden the Union County Youth Detention Center is home to up to 80 young people who have made mistakes and committed crimes and have been deemed by the courts to require incarceration. Architecturally, the center is classified as a corrections facility or a prison.

On any given night there are hundreds of homeless on the streets of Union County, an unknown number of them youth. National statistics reveal that one in eight youth under the age of 18 will leave home and become homeless in need of services and that 12- to 17-year-olds are at more risk of homelessness than are adults. In addition, 47 percent of runaway and homeless youth indicated that conflict with a parent or guardian was a major problem.

In Elizabeth the Union County Youth Shelter offers respite to youth heading down the wrong road toward detention and young people facing a crisis at home. The shelter looks like any other home on that street but could not be further away from the county detention center and the streets.

The Union County Youth Shelter is operated for the county by Community Access Unlimited (CAU), which serves people with disabilities and at-risk youth, providing housing support and life-skills training to enable them to live independently in the community.

CAU has been running the Union County Youth Shelter since 2006. The facility serves as transitional housing for youths aged 13-17, up to four at a time. After their stay at the shelter the youths are directed by the county Family Crisis unit or the courts into residential housing, treatment if there is a substance abuse issue, home or, if deemed necessary by the court, the Union County Juvenile Detention Center.

Detention is the avoided goal.

In 1992 the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) was launched by the Annie. E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization advocating for disadvantaged children. The JDAI is predicated on the belief that collaboration among juvenile justice agencies, community organizations and other government agencies can “decrease the number of youth unnecessarily or inappropriately detained; reduce the number of youth who fail to appear in court or re-offend pending adjudication; and redirect public funds towards effective juvenile justice processes and public safety strategies.”

Jurisdictions that have employed JDAI practices have reduced their daily youth detention population by up to 65 percent. Several years ago JDAI named New Jersey its first Model State Program and Union County has been a JDAI site since 2006. In its first two years under the program the county experienced an 18.9 percent reduction in youth admissions to detention and an 18.4 percent reduction in daily detention population.

In a press release announcing the success of the JDAI program and its own efforts in Union County, the Union County Prosecutor’s Office stated, “These changes helped create alternatives to detention through support and use of community-based programs and developed partnerships with child welfare agencies that resulted in a dramatic decrease in the average daily detention census at the detention center.”

Facilities such as the Union County Youth Shelter play an important role in this effort to redirect young people away from a continued downward spiral, according to Tanya Johnson, senior assistant executive director of youth services at the agency.

“We provide individual support that is extremely important at a critical juncture in the lives of these young people,” Johnson said. “Detention is in large groups. It is in a more institutionalized setting, which is not a normal setting. We do more goal-setting, trying to get them to think about their future. Here they still have the ability to make choices and we help them see those decisions will impact their future. In detention, they have no choices.”

While at the shelter a staff of 13 plus a teacher provide the youths with independent living skills, counseling, on-site schooling by a state-certified teacher or at the youth’s home school, family counseling and, if necessary, intervention.

The shelter is making a difference, according to Union County Superior Court Judge Robert Kirsch, who recently stated, “Routinely, I refer at-risk youths to the facility in an effort to avoid the constraints of the far more restrictive detention facility...(T)he work of the Youth Shelter contributes greatly to enabling the otherwise vulnerable juveniles in (the court’s) care to lead independent lives and be productive members of society.”

Youth who are not entangled in the juvenile justice system but face a crisis at home are no less vulnerable and CAU is able to help these young people, as well, through both the youth shelter and the Union County Runaway Shelter, which it also operates in the same building. Taking over operation of the youth shelter for the county enabled CAU to open the runaway shelter, according to Johnson.

“Without these facilities, most of the youth we serve in the youth shelter would be in detention and most of the homeless youth would still be homeless,” she said.

Next: A look at how the Union County Youth Shelter made a difference in the lives of one young man and his family.

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UNION COUNTY YOUTH SHELTER MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN LIVES

Darren and his mother thankful for the time he spent at the facility

Elizabeth, NJ – February 16, 2012 – Darren is a 16-year-old with his entire life ahead of him. Yet not too long ago he balanced on the precipice of a downward spiral into trouble. After committing a crime Darren was ordered by the court to enter the Union County Youth Shelter rather than into the county detention center.

Today Darren is back from the edge.

The Union County Youth Shelter serves as transitional housing for youths aged 13-17, up to four at a time. While at the shelter a staff of 13 plus a teacher provide independent living skills, counseling, on-site schooling by a state-certified teacher or at the youth's home school, family counseling and, if necessary, intervention, according to Julia Leftwich, a director at Community Access Unlimited (CAU), which runs the shelter for Union County.

After their stay at the shelter the youths are directed by the county Family Crisis unit or the courts into residential housing, treatment if there is a substance abuse issue, home or, if deemed necessary by the court, the Union County Juvenile Detention Center.

The court considers the shelter a positive option to detention, according to Union County Superior Judge Robert Kirsch.

"Routinely, I refer at-risk youths to the facility in an effort to avoid the constraints of the far more restrictive detention facility," Kirsch recently stated. "(T)he work of the Youth Shelter contributes greatly to enabling the otherwise vulnerable juveniles in (the court's) care to lead independent lives and be productive members of society."

Darren and his mother, Kathy, believe Darren will become just that. They also believe his time at the youth shelter played an important role in making that possible.

"(The court) felt it would be an environment where he could be watched 24 hours a day," Kathy said. "I work and my husband works. They felt until he could be placed in a residential program it would be best he was placed there to keep him out of trouble."

Kathy visited the shelter and came away knowing her son was in good hands, she said.

"I thought it was a great environment," she said. "They were very welcoming. I felt like if he could not be home this was the next best thing."

While living at the shelter Darren learned ways to stay out of trouble, he said. In fact, he felt so comfortable at the shelter that, after leaving, he asked to return when he faced a delay in transitioning into a residential program.

"I felt the shelter was a better place for me than at home at that time because I was afraid I was going to violate (probation)," he said.

Darren now lives in a residential program and looks forward to returning home for good. While at the shelter the staff helped him stay current with his school work and after finishing high school he plans to become a barber.

He knows his two stays at the Union County Youth Shelter played an important role in putting him on that path.

“It’s better to go to the shelter because it’s better for you,” he said. “It’s safe, the counselors are good and the food’s better (than in detention).”

“No parent wants to see their child in either facility,” Kathy said. “But since there was no choice, I preferred the shelter for a number of reasons. From my understanding Darren complied with everything he was asked to do. I thought it was a great environment for him to be in. He’s great now.”

Darren’s story is not unique, according to Leftwich.

“They want to be here as opposed to being in detention,” she said. “They’re grateful the shelter is here for them.”

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