

TY&FS helping homeless, runaway youth

By Laura Salinas

There are an estimated 1.6 million to 2.8 million young people identified as homeless and runaway youth in the United States.

This number may seem surprising to some, but what people don't realize is that this number reflects not just the youth living on the streets, but also the youth who are unaccompanied, meaning they are under the age of 18 who lack parental or institutionalized care. Furthermore, this number also reflects the youth who are couch surfing, wards of the court, at risk of becoming homeless and chronically homeless youth.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) defines homeless youth as individuals who are "not more than 21 years of age ... for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative and who have no other safe alternative living arrangement."

Only a few youth are truly homeless and do not receive any support. Unfortunately, when young people get to that point, it is often almost impossible for them to seek help and make changes to improve their quality of life. It is when they are at-risk or have experienced minimal homelessness that they have the best chance to lead a different life.

During November, Tahoe Youth & Family Services coordinates with the National Runaway Switch Board and other local agencies to bring awareness to our community. Awareness and prevention is the best way to help the youth in our community from running away and becoming homeless. Despite great efforts, there are still a few young people in our communities who attend school and have no idea where they will be sleeping tonight. These youth go unnoticed, not from the lack of

interest from school officials or other adults, but because they are experts at hiding their lifestyles for fear of being institutionalized.

Everyone is encouraged to participate in the National Runaway Prevention Month. By working together we can help youth identify community resources and develop life skills. This can make a crucial difference between a youth running away and finding the resources they need to be successful. Youth and families need to know that there are options and alternatives to running away from home and living on the streets.

“Tahoe Youth & Family Services has provided me with not only a reliable safe place to eat, shower and do laundry, but most importantly has provided me with immediate help. I could not ask for more of a kind, fun, caring, understanding and realistic staff members when in times of trouble and need. Not only do they help families, but have become family since I have never had one of my own. .. if anyone needs anything I always direct them to TYFS’ Drop in Center ... this place saved my life,” said Elliot, whose full identity is being protected.

Tahoe Youth & Family Services’ Drop In Centers are a point of entry for youth to get supportive services they need as well as motivation to move beyond the street with guidance and compassion. It’s a great place for youth to get recharged, get resources, and get respect.

For more information on TYFS Drop In Centers or how you can help runaway youth in our community, contact Cheyanne Lane at (530) 541.2445 or Cheyanne@tahoeyouth.org. Our South Lake Tahoe Drop In Center is open from 1-5pm Tuesday-Saturday and is located at 1021 Fremont Ave. Our Gardnerville Drop In Center is located at 1307 Langley in the Ranchos, behind 7-Eleven. It is open Tuesday-Friday 3-7pm and 11am-7pm on Saturdays.

TYFS offers services in the areas of family counseling,

substance abuse treatment services, mentoring and support services for runaway and homeless youth. We offer counseling services in South Lake Tahoe (1021 Fremont Ave.), Gardnerville (1422 Mission St.), Incline Village (DWR Center, 948 Incline Way) and Woodfords (Early Learning Center, 100 Foothill Road) TYFS 24-hour crisis line is 800.870.8937.

Laura Salinas works for Tahoe Youth & Family Services.