

Opinion: TY&FS helping runaway, homeless kids cope

By Cheyanne Lane

What are the first thoughts that go through your mind when you see a youth on the streets? How did they get there, where are their parents, and are they safe?

It's disturbing to realize that between 1.6 million and 2.8 million youth run away annually. Most youth who run away do so because of threatening environments at home, such as physical-verbal abuse, neglect, substance abuse issues, questions of sexual orientation, or escaping state care.

Unfortunately, by choosing to run away, they further subject themselves to threatening situations that impede their progress in life. Young people who live on the streets are at high risk of developing serious, life-long health, behavioral, and emotional problems. They suffer from high rates of depression, poor health, low self-esteem, and higher likelihood of suicide, survival sex, pregnancy, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorders. The longer they live on the streets, the more likely they are to fall victim to sexual exploitation, human trafficking and engaging in high-risk behaviors, which in turn cause them to be more likely to remain homeless and more resistant to change.

Almost 40 years ago, the groundbreaking Runaway and Homeless Youth Act created the first line of defense for young people who had run away from home, become homeless, or been asked to leave home by their families. Congress recognized the precarious circumstances of young people who could not return home but did not yet have the financial, social, or emotional resources to live successfully on their own. Today, that safety net is woven by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act,

most recently reauthorized by the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008, and administered by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) within the Administration for Children & Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Tahoe Youth & Family Services has been able to provide for homeless, runaway, couch surfing, or at risk youth for 38 years in South Lake Tahoe, eight years in Gardnerville, and three years in Alpine County. We have provided these supportive services by being awarded the Basic Center Program grant that funds our emergency host home shelters for minors up to the age of and 18 and drop in centers services for youth up to the age of 24 who are either at immediate risk of being homeless or who are already on the streets.

Beyond emergency services, basic centers provide supportive services, mediation and counseling to keep youth in their homes or to reunify them with their families after they've left, if appropriate.

TYFS has also been awarded the Street Outreach Program grant that provides education and prevention services to runaway, homeless and street youth who have been subjected to, or are at risk of being subjected to, abuse or exploitation.

Last fiscal year TYFS had 92 unduplicated clients pass through our doors. Youth accessing Basic Center services through TYFS' drop in centers received 7,526 individual food, 271 backpacks of healthy food and snacks and survival aid items including 192 pairs of socks, 309 hygiene products, 16 sleeping bags, two tents, 284 articles of clothing, 18 pairs of shoes and staff assisted three chronically homeless youth with obtaining proper identification in order to obtain employment, apply for funding to attend the local community college and get off the streets.

Tahoe Youth & Family Services' drop in centers are a point of entry to provide information, resources, and opportunities to

all youth who are homeless, living in poverty or who may be at risk of becoming homeless and/or are seeking to improve their overall wellness, and quality of life to find stability. Our drop in center staff can assist youth with the following supportive services: food, clothing, socks, sleeping bags, back packs, hygiene supplies, laundry services, showers, help looking for a job or filling out an application, obtaining proper identification, as well as motivation to move beyond the street with guidance and compassion.

The Drop in Center is a great place for youth to: get recharged, get resources and get respect.

Become a mentor for youth in our community today, to help prevent youth from looking toward the streets as a way out.

For more information on the drop in center or how you can help runaway and homeless youth in our community please contact me at 530.541.2445.

Cheyenne Lane is the supportive services coordinator for Tahoe Youth & Family Services.