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Stability is therapeutic

New DCF approach is to give boys as normal a home as possible

BY GENNADY SHEYNER REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — In a spacious ranch-style home on a leafy East End block, five traumatized boys are trying to get their lives back together.

The boys, ages 9 to 12, have been severely abused and neglected by their parents or guardians. Most have been shuttled from one residential facility to another before they arrived at this nondescript five-bedroom home.

They suffer from learning disabilities and psychological disorders including post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and major depression. One lived in the back seat of his mother's car while she worked as a prostitute; another one was sexually abused by a sibling.

Three have lived in institutions for most of their lives.

Now, they are among the roughly 250 children in the state in a therapeutic group home, a new type of residence that the Department of Children and Families views as its best tool to treat childhood trauma.

The Paladin House, designed to house five boys between the ages of 9 to 14, opened two years ago, one of 40 gender-specific therapeutic group homes that opened in about 35 Connecticut municipalities since 2005.

The number is expected to grow to 50 by the end of this year, said Gary Kleeblatt, spokesman for the Department of Children and Families. Other towns, including Winsted and Middletown, have therapeutic group homes, and one is scheduled to open in Wolcott in the next month.

The idea, Kleeblatt said, is to give traumatized children an environment that's as close to a real home as possible.

"The consensus is, nationwide, that children belong, do best and deserve to be in the least restricted level of care possible, consistent with treatment needs," Kleeblatt said. "We want kids to ultimately go back to a regular home or back to the community, so we need to develop skills for children to do well in those kinds of settings."

Though it's too early to tell exactly how much long-term benefit residents will derive from the group homes, these facilities are already helping the DCF meet several of its goals, including reducing the number of children in the more restrictive residential facilities and lowering the number of DCF-referred Connecticut children who get treated out of state.

Kleeblatt noted that the number of children in residential facilities has dropped from 889 in April 2004, to about 650 today, a 27 percent reduction. Meanwhile, the number of out-of-state children has dropped from 491 in September 2004 to 303 in Sept of this year, a 38 percent drop.

"More kids are now being served in Connecticut, which we think is better for kids transitioning back to their families," Kleeblatt said.

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The boys play the Gamecube and organized sports; they study, argue, complain, giggle, scream and do everything else one would expect from a group of pre-teenage boys. Each has his own room. One timid 12-year-old resident spends much of his time in his room playing a hand-held Pokemon video game. On the wall hangs an elaborate poster with remarkably realistic-looking tigers that he drew.

Their games and activities, however, often have a therapeutic angle, Barrios said.

Sometimes they hold basketball games in which the goal is to allow the other team to win, at other times they partake in art therapy or talk to trained counselors about their feelings. The house is staffed by about 20 employees and at least two of them are awake at any given moment.

Residents' lives away from the group home are also inching toward the normal.

The boys attend local schools, play in sports leagues and volunteer at local church groups. One boy went trick-or-treating for the first time in his life last year. Another resident, who was afraid of being touched when he moved into Paladin House, now willingly give hugs.

The key is to give these boys stability, which they lacked for most of their lives, said Gary Steck, executive director of the Child Guidance of Greater Waterbury, the agency that runs Paladin House.

"A therapeutic group home is a long-term experience," said Steck, whose agency is also in charge of Wolcott's Valiant House, which is due to open on Spindle Hill

Road in the next month.

"We are hoping to prevent them from being hospitalized and to keep them from getting into the juvenile justice system. It's a lot easier to do that in this type of setting."

Like most preteen boys, the residents of this group home occasionally argue and fight. But at the end of a day, they are fiercely loyal to each other, said Paladin House director Digby Barrios.

During the football game, when one child gets upset over a call that doesn't go his way and threatens to quit, the others quickly rush over to comfort him and encourage him to keep playing. When one scores a touchdown, the other is quick to give him a high five.

Still, getting them to adjust to school and other aspects of everyday life is a gradual process that Digby said often requires years. Though the children have made significant strides, they still get nervous when left unsupervised.

"They're terrified to come out of the house," Barrios said. "They're scared because life has treated them so poorly."