

Center Will Help Runaway Teenagers

By SHERRI ACKERMAN The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA - It's hard enough being a teenager in today's world, reasons Diane Zambito.

But imagine being a teen taken from your parents and placed with strangers.

And what happens if they don't like their new home? Some foster teens run away.

"They don't know what to expect," said Zambito, who oversees a program that teaches foster teens how to live on their own once they turn 18. "It's a huge problem."

That concern motivated child welfare advocates to create a center where teens 13 and older can talk with peers about foster care and solve problems they have with their placement.

The center, in a beautifully restored 1913 Victorian-style house on Nebraska Avenue, also will serve as a drop-in center where teens on the run can take showers, eat, talk with counselors - everything but stay overnight, Zambito said.

"That's next!" she said. "That's the one piece we're missing."

The new teen service center also will give law-enforcement officers a place to take runaways to help them get back into the system.

"Sometimes, when kids come off the run, they feel like they're being punished," said Jeff Rainey, chief executive officer of Hillsborough Kids Inc., a private agency that oversees local foster care for the state. "We don't want them to feel that way."

The hope is to reduce the number of runaways as well as disruptions in foster care, Rainey said.

As of Wednesday, the Florida Department of Children & Families reported 601 children missing from state care. Teen runaways make up a large percentage of that number.

Hillsborough Kids funded the teen center. It has a \$200,000 annual contract with Camelot Community Care, another child-welfare agency, to operate the program. Doors open in two to three weeks.

Talks were under way for much of the year to create the center, he said.

"We want it to be a safe haven," Rainey said. "But it's not just for runaways."

The 2,400-square-foot building was restored by owner Scott Bartlett of Gulf Stream of Tampa Bay and his contractors. A tin roof, weather vane and antique crystal chandelier were among special touches Bartlett added to the home for teens.

It's the second home he has worked on for foster children. The first one, at 405 Palm Ave., is operated by Zambito's organization, Connected By 25, a national pilot program that started a school and uses community dollars to help foster teens further their education and learn life skills.

Teens who age out of foster care remain eligible for state benefits, including Medicaid and a stipend to pay for living expenses, while they are working and going to school. Having the extra help can make a big difference in their success, Zambito said.

The teen center is an extension of those services.

"At night, they'll have a place to chill and talk about what happened," she said. "They're going to have kids there who can explain what to expect about foster care."

"I'm confident this is going to make a difference," Zambito said. "Is this going to be the answer for everybody? No, but it will be an answer for many."

For information, call Hillsborough Kids at (813) 225-1105; Connected By 25 at (813) 228-0731; or the teen line at (813) 314-2076 or by e-mail at teen@hillsboroughkids.org.

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