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Groups partner to help homeless youth in Josephine County

By Vickie Aldous of the Daily Courier

In the same week that Gospel Rescue Mission broke ground on a housing project for senior citizens in Grants Pass, a half-dozen groups gathered to share how they help homeless youths and young adults on the opposite end of the age spectrum.

"Obviously, youth homelessness can look different than homelessness that we may see every day," said Chris Willis, Josephine County director for Youth 71Five Ministries.

Homeless kids and teens are less likely to be out on the streets and visible to the public.

"A lot of the kids just kind of couch surf through a lot of different houses in town. They may be moving temporarily between family members," he said, adding that others might be sleeping in vehicles after their families get evicted.

But 71Five and other organizations are stepping in to change their lives, often working together so youngsters and families don't slip through the cracks. The partners described their efforts this week in a Grants Pass meeting organized by Partners Assisting the Homeless, known as PATH.

With locations in Josephine and Jackson counties, the 71Five VoTech program teaches homeless and housed youths ages 16 to 24 career skills like auto repair, welding, steel fabrication, construction and firefighting. They can enter the workforce, join apprenticeship programs or continue their career training at places like Rogue Community College.

Youths can take part in outdoor camps and clubs, get support and training for expectant or parenting teens, and meet caring mentors.

"One of the biggest things we see most often is a lot of these young people don't even have a caring adult in their life. They get to come into our programs and we get to help build that relationship with them," said Willis, who is also a firefighter.

At a time when many families are struggling to make ends meet and can't afford to go out to restaurants and movie theaters, family nights with movies and games provide entertainment, he said.

As one example of success, Willis said a young man staying at the Gospel Rescue Mission homeless shelter in Grants Pass came to a VoTech program, learned welding, got housing and landed a good-paying job.

"If we all work together we can probably tackle a huge chunk of the objectives that we're trying to accomplish. It gives a better chance to a lot of the young people in this community — giving them the right help at the right time," Willis said.

Gospel Rescue Mission has a 75-bed shelter for men and a 60-bed shelter for women and children in Grants Pass.

"It is a safe, supportive environment for women and children in crisis," Laura Smithwick, director of resident services for Gospel Rescue Mission, said of the Fikso Family Center shelter for women and children. "We're more than just a shelter."

Residents get hot meals, clothing from the mission's thrift stores, job training, and a chance to save up their money to get into housing.

"Most importantly, it's a place for families to rebuild their lives — where we can help restore dignity and independence," Smithwick said.

Gospel Rescue Mission always has openings, especially at the women and children's shelter.

"We have a ton of room, and I know there are families out there that need housing. The Gospel Rescue Mission is an option," Smithwick said.

Rules include requirements to attend religious services, and no nicotine, alcohol or drugs. The mission can provide nicotine patches to help people taper off. It accommodates residents' work schedules if they have or find jobs.

The 150-bed Parker's Place Village homeless shelter in Grants Pass accepts people as young as 18. Youth below that age are referred out to community organizations that can help.

Rules include no alcohol or drugs on site. Pets are allowed.

The Maslow Project serving Josephine and Jackson counties helps homeless youth up to age 24 and their families. Young people might be couch surfing, or living in a hotel, shelter, vehicle or unsafe situation.

Working closely with school districts, the organization helps young people continue their educations — such as finishing high school — and works to get them stable housing or prevent homelessness in the first place. Youths can get food, clothing, hygiene products, baby supplies, education and job search support, health insurance enrollment and connections to housing.

Erin Zelinka, development officer for Maslow Project, said an 18-year-old girl fled an abusive situation and was going to live in her vehicle. She had no rental history and no money for deposits and rent. Maslow Project found housing for her and she was able to get a job she loves as a caregiver. Her brother, who was also at risk of homelessness, was able to move in with her.

Zelinka said the teen's life could have gone in two directions.

"One path could have been homelessness, and one path is her being this person with a full-time job, an apartment. She's contributing to society, she's helping others," Zelinka said.

Maslow Project has housing vouchers for young adults ages 18 to 24 who've been foster kids. Eight apartments in the 68-unit Allen Creek Crossing affordable housing project that's nearly done in Grants Pass will be reserved for Maslow Project participants.

The Salvation Army has launched its Pathway to Hope program in Grants Pass, offering one-on-one case management for homeless families with children. Families set and achieve goals in areas like education, employment, housing and childcare.

The Salvation Army has rental assistance to help families avoid eviction.

The Project Youth+ program in Josephine, Jackson and southern Douglas counties is best known for helping teens prepare for college.

But it has rounded out to help youth learn about jobs that don't require college degrees. Youth can prepare for careers through paid internships and skills training.

The Whatever It Takes program through Project Youth+ intervenes to help students who aren't on track to graduate from high school. Some are homeless, while others are from well-off families, said Clarissa Law, program adviser at Project Youth+.

Students get personalized help to catch up on school credits and explore careers. The Whatever It Takes program has an 85% graduation rate, she said.

"It's the best job in the world. I get to be a cheerleader for them," Law said.

Joe's Place offers faith-based youth centers in Grants Pass and Cave Junction for middle school and high school students. It's planning another center in Merlin. The organization started about 20 years ago focused primarily on homeless youth, said Eddie Matz of Joe's Place.

It now works with a wide variety of youth, including those who are homeless, he said.

Youth can learn responsibility and earn money by raising and selling pigs. They'll be working this holiday season at the Joe's Place Christmas tree lot at the Josephine County Fairgrounds, which serves as a fundraiser.

Students can take part in after-school programs, have a place to hang out and do outdoor activities like summer camp, fishing and rafting, Matz said.

"We're showing these kids that there's more to life. There's more than the situation they're in. There's a better life out there for them. There's places to go in life," he said.

Many of the organizations that help kids and families will have giving trees scattered throughout communities this coming holiday season. People can pick up tags and buy gifts for families in need.

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