

Homeless: Jefferson County schools report 150 homeless kids under 18

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hang out, do homework, take a shower or just relax.

"We've negotiated with the YMCA to be a drop-in center for the kids, with free memberships," Scott said. "They can come in, do their homework, unwind a little. They will have lockers and spaces for them to store their things."

Scott said, when students stay with friends or family members, sometimes both sides need a little time away from one another.

"If a family is letting a kid stay with them, this (the YMCA) is a good way for the family to spend time together before the guest comes home," she said. "The receiving family can have dinner, help kids with homework, before an additional child shows up to sleep there."

Volunteer group is making a difference

The HYI works closely with school and county officials to identify and monitor homeless teens.

"We stay in touch with social workers, to make sure these kids are not sleeping in cars or on benches somewhere," Scott said. "There are some criteria schools use to define homelessness; if the kids fit under those, they get free lunch, and other things they need."

It is a delicate tightrope walk to help young people without exposing their identities.

"We don't meet the kids; they're under age and that's why we work through the schools," Scott said. "We never use their names or their photographs; that's to protect their privacy."

Fouts said the group has made a big difference in the lives of homeless teens.

"The Homeless Youth Initiative is such great support for the kids and the families," she said. "I know, if I'm needing something and I can't find it in my regular resources, I shoot an email to that group and I know someone will help me."

"This group has opened up so many doors; they've always been responsive. That's a good feeling, knowing there are so many people out there willing to help a kid in need."

The Homeless Youth Initiative operates under the umbrella of the Jefferson County Disability Resource Association.

"We've been under the DRA for about a year," Scott said. "That gave us 501c3 status, so donations are tax-deductible. We also get liability insurance, and that kind of thing."

Although a large part of the group's focus is on what the young person needs right now, members are also careful to take the long view as well.

"We have started a group called 4-H Youth Futures, that takes (high school) seniors and helps them see there's something beyond high school," Scott said. "That is helpful in helping them transition to college."

"And we now have a really healthy

scholarship fund set up for Jefferson College. We have three previously homeless youth attending there right now."

The group also helps cover college expenses like supplies or fees for homeless kids.

More money means more and better programs to help the kids.

"This year, we did a car wash, we held a 5K run," Scott said. "Next year we hope to have even more fundraisers." Individuals, groups or organizations who want to help are welcome to contact Scott to pitch in.

"If a church group or Scout group or whatever wanted to come along with us, they can help us out and split the pro-

ceeds," she said. "A group or organization could do a drive to collect travel-size personal care items. We just ask they coordinate with us so they get the right kind of stuff."

"And, of course, cash donations are great; the money can go toward buying items or into separate funds. Whatever the donor wants, they can designate."

To learn more about the Homeless Youth Initiative or to download a donation form, go to www.disabilityresourceassociation.org and click on "DRA Programs."

To contact the group directly, call 636-931-7696, ext. 158; or mail to 130 Brandon Wallace Way, Festus, 63028.

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