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Skills for moms in crisis

Parent educators focus on families in Joliet homeless shelters

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By JEANNE MILLSAP For The Herald News

The needs of young children living in homeless shelters are great, but their greatest need might be the support of their parents. Adults who end up in shelters often feel they are at the lowest point in their lives and are not necessarily in the best frame of mind for parenting.

"They're in crisis mode," explained Barbara Terhall, coordinator of Parent University, which oversees Will County's Jump Start program. "These parents are in such crises that they don't have the time or energy to spend quality time with their kids. They are just concerned about their very existence."

That's why Terhall applied for a state grant to place parent educators into all of the Joliet homeless shelters.

Between 200 and 300 agencies applied for the Illinois State Board of Education grant, which is offered annually, and only 10 programs were approved. The Joliet Jump Start program was one of them.

Terhall learned her program was a recipient in September.

"There are lots of families at these shelters," Terhall said. "You'd be surprised at the numbers of children there."

Lambfold Center for Women and Children, Guardian Angel Community Services, Daybreak Center, and Morningstar Mission now all have full-time parent educators hired with the new grant money, and Jump Start is working on getting one into Shepherd's House, as well.

'Answer to our prayers'

Terhall said she decided to apply for the grant because she could see a big need that wasn't being met. These are definitely at-risk families, she said. Many of the young mothers and children there are "the neediest of the needy" for parenting help.

Before the grant, Jump Start provided parent educators to meet with parents of young children in their homes, guiding them through the sometimes difficult process of good parenting. The organization has served Joliet and surrounding areas for four years.

The grant allowed the organization to hire five additional parent educators - one of whom is bilingual -- that were placed in the shelters in the past two months.

"It's a wonderful program," said Jean Mandeville, program supervisor with Lambfold. "Our clients need this service."

Mandeville said five families currently are receiving support from the parent educators. Mothers come into the Lambfold shelter focusing on very basic needs for themselves and their children, Mandeville said, such as just getting a roof over their heads.

"A parent educator helps to give them that reminder of what the kids are going through," she said. "The services are strongly encouraged by our staff, and the women are so open to it. They have welcomed it. They appreciate having someone to talk to about their children. . . This is an answer to our prayers, really. It is just so awesome."

What is taught

Jump Start parent educators in the homeless shelters work with parents of children who are newborn to age 3. They also work with pregnant women on prenatal issues.

Some mothers-to-be, especially first-time mothers, need to know what to expect of motherhood, Terhall explained. Moms need to know that good parenting begins immediately. Pregnant women need to think about good prenatal care, about the needs of their babies once they are born, and about bonding attachment.

An example of how a parent educator might work with the mother of a 1-year-old is to explain the importance of dental care. Babies at that age should have their first dental visit, Terhall said.

The educator might also talk about the fine motor skills of the face and mouth, to prepare the baby for speech and for eating foods and drinking from a cup.

The mom could give her baby an empty cup and allow the child to pick it up and begin exploring it or putting it to the mouth. Moms can also begin giving babies finger foods so they can begin learning how to pick them up and put them up to their mouths.

Social skills become important at that age, too. Parents would be encouraged to teach their babies what to do when they hear specific words. A mom might play peek-a-boo with her child or roll a piece of paper up into a ball and roll it back and forth to teach turn-taking.

For parents of 2-year-olds, parent educators might play matching games or make animals with play dough for finger fine motor skills. They might also discuss the importance of well-baby checks and other health-related topics.

There is a specific curriculum the parent educators use for each age, Terhall said. The educators in the shelters also go through 60 hours of sexual assault and domestic violence training at Guardian Angel.

"I really believe in the Jump Start program and the long-term effects it can provide," Terhall said. "We are making a difference in the lives of these young families."

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