

Hope for displaced teens in Middlesex County

By Cassandra Day
November 10, 2017

MIDDLETOWN — Carissa Conway, director of the Women and Families Center, solidly believes there is hope for youth whose distressful family situations, coupled with a lack of a complete post-secondary education, have propelled them into homelessness.

“We understand and we get the dynamics of runaway and homeless youth,” she said about staff at the Meriden-based nonprofit that services Middlesex County, Wallingford and Meriden.

“You don’t wake up and decide you want to get into this work because you want to work with homeless youth, or those traumatized by sexual assault. You do this because the work means something to you,” said Conway, whose organization is one of the state’s recipients of a \$6.6 million grant from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program.

Right now, there is a little-known crisis among young adults who, for many reasons are living on the street, sporadically in shelters or couch surfing. That includes Middletown, said Ann Faust, executive director of the Coalition on Housing and Homelessness in Middletown.

“Kids 17 and under represent most of the homeless population, and that’s just unacceptable in our society,” Faust said. Although many homeless people from ages 17 to 23 are considered adults by society, they are far from prepared to be resourceful or even live on their own, Faust said.

“The needs of those folks are vastly different from needs of other individuals who are using homeless shelters,” Conway said.

Angie, 16, and Dwayne, 23, are two of the more than a dozen young people North End resident Nur Fitzpatrick has been helping for the last two years, she said. Angi and Dwayne asked their last names be withheld for this story. Both grew up in troubled households and haven’t had a healthy family situation, they said.

“The main problem (besides a living situation) is having somewhere to go; to chill,” Dwayne said. “Not hanging out. We mainly want to have a place to go.”

He also wishes he and others had guidance from a mentor or caring adult — something that’s not easy to find, he said. “With parents, they can protect you from doing things and all that, but I feel you’re supposed to make mistakes,” said Dwayne, who admits he has misstepped a number of times in the past because of his situation. He feels so comfortable with the sense of family he experiences when Angie, he and the other homeless teens enjoy a simple conversation with Fitzpatrick while they all prepare dinner.

“It’s like having a mother in a way that’s showing you what’s good to do, but it’s not someone who is going to drive you crazy,” Angie said.

“I came here the first day — it was raining,” Angie said. “All day, I wanted to watch a movie so bad but I couldn’t.” By coincidence, (Fitzpatrick) “came home and said, ‘You can go in there and watch a movie if you want because I’m going to step out.’ That was it” — all Fitzpatrick had to say to make her happy.



Nur Fitzpatrick, center, has been helping Dwayne, 23, left, and Angie, 16, along with several other homeless young people in Middletown.

Photo: Cassandra Day / Hearst Connecticut Media

"For real?" Fitzpatrick asked as Angie related the story. "That's cute. And it was a good movie, too. Wonder Woman!"

Mentors, when they don't have parents or guardians around, Angie said, are "a good thing to have for youth that don't have anyone, because they don't know who to look up to. They look up to movies and music, and they go down the wrong path because they feel like they can't live up to that unrealistic expectation," she said.

Programs like those offered by the Woman and Children's Center can allow displaced teens feel some modicum of comfort and belonging, Conway said. Also, with education comes empowerment.

With the grant, the center will be able to open a transitional living program for 18- to 22-year-old homeless and unstably housed young people. It will pay for six beds, she said. "The goal of the project will be to arm young adults with everything they need to live independently," Conway said.

When they first step into the office looking for services, youth will work with liasons on an individual service plan and set up goals, she said. But each youth can only take advantage of the organization's offerings for a year and a half. "Eighteen months is not a lot of time when you're looking at youth who may not have had the same skills taught to them as many of the others you have in the community," Conway said.

Homeless young people often end up in these circumstances and remain there for several reasons, according to the Partnership for Strong Communities of Hartford. Among them: fleeing abuse at home, fear of the state Department of Children and Families and foster care, avoiding or being unaware of limited services, not being connected to formal supports, or being rejected or forced out of family situations.

Complicating the situation, "18 percent of youth who are homeless have been sexually assaulted or encouraged to exchange sex for drugs, food, a place to stay and clothing," Faust said.

The federal funds will allow the state to create more resources for rapid rehousing. "Many times, youth are really resilient and they do have skills, and what they need is support like a security deposit and first month's rent," Faust said. "I'm big proponent of let's start small and build up, but I also think six beds is a really great start for us," Conway said.

Stacey Violante Cote, director of the Center for Children's Advocacy's Teen Legal Project in Hartford, works with youth who are homeless or at great risk of homelessness. "Our Mobile Legal Office travels to community locations to make it easy for youth to talk to us and get the support they need. We can help with issues such as school enrollment, transportation to school for youth without a permanent place to live, access to special education supports, benefits and more," she said.

"Our legal advocacy includes supports required by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, federal law that helps keep school consistent when all else in a youth's life is unstable. Children and youth in homeless situations have the right to go to school, no matter where they live. They have the right to stay in the school they were enrolled in when they lost their permanent housing, or they can choose to attend the school where they have temporary housing. Schools must continue to provide transportation," Violante Cote said.

Another challenge for kids who are under 18 and homeless is access to their birth certificates, something the legal project can also help with, she said.

There was only \$194,000 available from HUD to apply for, said Conway, and a portion of those monies will support a 24-hour staff person at the transitional housing center.

"I'm also charged with finding an additional \$19,000 year for five years to keep this program running," Conway said. "That's huge! But we're filling a huge hole in the community. They're here to stay here for the 18 months, we're going to provide them with the case management services, we're going to teach them basic living skills, we're going to reconnect them with schooling, we're going to connect them with employment."

"Nobody wants to be outside," Dwayne said.

For information, see speakupteens.org, anendinten.org, cca-ct.org, womenfamilies.org, svdmiddletown.org, Women and Families Center on Facebook or pschousing.org.