

Livingston Daily

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For this year's election, vote with homeless kids and families in mind

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Typically seen as an urban problem, the issue of homelessness and runaway youth challenges rural communities, too. Labeled a silent epidemic with many living in shame, homelessness touches a sizable population of children, youth and families in Michigan.

In the 2017-2018 school year, 14 percent of children attending Michigan's K-12 schools were considered homeless, either because their families became homeless, or they left home on their own, according to the Michigan Network for Youth and Families. One of those was a teen from Livingston County named Isabel.

Two years ago, Isabel left a dangerous home with nowhere to go. Scared and alone, she had, "no job, no plan and no hope." Fortunately, she was directed to The Connection, a program at the Livingston Family Center.

The shelter has a uniquely trained and committed staff who provide intensive therapy (mental health and substance abuse), support groups and case management for dozens of homeless youth. Its goal is to reunite youth with their families or find a safe, stable alternative.

The center also runs a 24/7 street outreach program to ensure kids who are at risk, couch surfing or in family crisis know about the service. For those who can't go home again, there is a transitional living program that provides a limited number of youth with a place to live and classes to build skills for independent living.

Despite its successes, The Connection isn't able to help every youth in need. State budget cuts last year forced it to scale back overnight beds to just three! In response, the program and Michigan's Children ramped up their advocacy before state officials.

Youth staying at The Connection became emboldened, participating in a three-week training with the Michigan Network for Youth and Families to share their experiences with lawmakers in the hopes of building allies.

Isabel, now poised to move into her own apartment, told attendees in a trembling voice that what young people need more than anything is a safe place to live, and to be heard. A 14-year-old boy made a plaintive cry for lowering the cost of adoption, hoping that would create more families willing to house others like him.

It's still unclear whether The Connection will gain back those needed beds, but it was good to see the governor and legislative leaders recently agree to increase funding to homeless and runaway youth services across the state by \$400,000.

Kids become homeless for a variety of reasons: economic hardship in a depressed economy; severe family conflict including abuse and abandonment; pregnancy; substance abuse; a non-accepted sexual orientation.

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Many experience physical and sexual abuse and are too often trafficked for sex when homeless. Others “age out” of foster care, and many exit the juvenile justice system in Michigan without skills or financial means. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the needs of homeless youth and families.

Youth homelessness is a complex problem that demands response from elected leaders. Support is critical to grow and expand the small network of runaway and homeless youth programs in Michigan that provide a critical safety net to stabilize youth and families and prevent more costly interventions.

Before you cast your vote, call/email/contact candidates and ask: How would you pledge to help youth experiencing homelessness in my community? Then select those committed to improving public investment in youth and families.

In these anxious times, hone in on what makes our communities strong — and help strengthen our children and families' lives.

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