

As homeless youth increase, room at Stepping Stones does not by much: www.heraldtimesonline.com

Program will only have a total of 9 beds to help those in need

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New federal legislation has expanded the definition of homeless youth, increasing the number of young people who qualify for the Stepping Stones housing program.

But despite plans to expand from seven to nine beds, the Stepping Stones program — which provides transitional housing and support services to people age 16 to 20 experiencing homelessness — will not be able to keep pace with the growing number of young clients seeking its services.

"It's disconcerting," said Warren Wade, assistant director of Stepping Stones. "We already are getting one to two calls a week from youth — or the youths' family members or school counselors — looking for a place for young people to stay. But if we're full, there's not a lot we can do for them."

The legislation, called the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) amendment, re-authorizes the McKinney-Vento Act — passed by Congress in 1987. The amendment, which is expected to go into effect in the fall of 2011, will expand the government's definition of homeless youth to include those living in a motel or relative's home.

"The amendment also expands the definition of imminent risk of becoming homeless," Wade said.

Wade said the MCCSC recently conducted a survey that identified a dozen high-school aged youth who were staying in a shelter or motel, or living with family or friends.

"Because only half the surveys were returned, we can extrapolate that there are about two dozen MCCSC students who ... may be eligible to be housed in our program," Wade said.

He said there are currently three males and four females, mostly from Monroe County, in the Stepping Stones program. They live in the College Mall Apartments at 2615 E. Second St.

The young people can live rent- and utility-free for the first two months, then must start paying a gradually increasing portion of those expenses. The most they would pay would be a third of their rent and a third to a half of their utilities.

They can stay in the apartments for up to two years, but are strongly encouraged to work at least 15 hours a week if they're in school and full time if they are not; and work toward earning their high school diploma or GED if they have not already earned either.

"We believe education and employment are essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness," said Wade.

Young people who enter the program work with staff to create a "life map" that contains their personal goals and the career path they wish to pursue.

No additional funding

Though Wade is happy about the larger pool of young people that Stepping Stones could potentially house, he regrets that his agency doesn't have the money to vastly expand its total number of beds. He said the new amendment does not increase the funding Stepping Stones receives from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Wade said this fall, Stepping Stones will be able to increase its bed total from 7 to 9 due to a federal emergency shelter grant, a Jack Hopkins Social Service Fund grant and the Community Foundation — which is paying for new beds and dressers and some staff salary support.

"That's good, but I just wish we could grow even more than that." Wade said Stepping Stones, which has an annual budget of \$275,000, has a five-year plan that includes such things as more outreach programming and possibly a business enterprise like Middle Way's FoodWorks catering service.

"Most of the youth who come to us are experiencing some kind of family dysfunction. We'd like to provide services for the youth and their families that will help them work on ways to resolve conflicts — as well as provide employment and educational assistance — so that the youth don't end up homeless."

Wade said if Stepping Stones started up a business similar to FoodWorks, it would provide young people with marketable skills while also generating income that could be put back into Stepping Stones' housing program.