



Staff photo by

Ray Ellis, center, a Covenant House worker, talks with teens in Atlantic City while out looking for youngsters who need help.

N.Y.'s Covenant House reaches out to help runaways in Atlantic City

By ROSEMARY ELLIS
Staff Writer

In its New York City headquarters, scandal-ridden Covenant House wrestles with allegations of sexual misconduct by its founder and with financial improprieties. The local office of the nation's largest shelter system for runaway youths, however, is concentrating on the problems of teenagers in Atlantic City and Pleasantville.

For the eight staff members of the Covenant House that opened in November on St. James Place in Atlantic City, that means hitting the streets very night looking for runaways and street kids who need help.

The most recent statistics estimate that 43 percent of the youths Covenant House workers have seen on the streets either use intravenous drugs or engage in prostitution.

It also means teaching them about AIDS, because some of these youngsters — those who become drug users or prostitutes — are among those most likely to get the deadly HIV virus.

"Right now we are getting to know the kids in the area and developing a network with other social service agencies.

It's really too early to tell how (the New York) problems will affect us," said Mary Ellen Lilly, administrator of the Atlantic City site.

Problems for the nationally known charity began in December when its president and founder, the Rev. Bruce Ritter, was accused of sexual misconduct.

He denied the charge. Ritter's Franciscan order is now investigating the 63-year-old cleric's alleged coerced sex from runaways, including one former male prostitute.

This was followed by investigations the organization paid money to some of its officials without the knowledge of the board of directors. The New York state investigation into those charges is now under way.

But local Covenant House workers are optimistic. "Local problems will not hinder their ability to help youths in the area," they say.

"The kids here need help."
 See Agency, Page A

FROM PAGE A1

Agency: Shelter in A.C. keeping focus on area youths

(Continued from Page A1)

know that much about Covenant House, so what is going on in New York isn't important to them. Whether or not they have a place to stay is what's important," Lilly said.

It's also important to the Covenant House social workers who ride a minivan every night through troubled neighborhoods, talking to youths about the new outreach program aimed at reducing the spread of AIDS among teenagers.

On a recent evening, three outreach case managers acted like parents on wheels when they toured neighborhoods in Atlantic City and Pleasantville in the Cov-

enant House van.

The social workers talked to teenagers who were hanging out on street corners about staying in school, getting summer jobs and staying away from drug dealers.

"Hey, hey, my man. You going to get a job this summer?" asked outreach worker Ray Ellis, as the van stopped next to two teenagers on Baltic Avenue in Atlantic City.

Ellis and the other outreach workers introduced themselves to teens and handed out business cards in neighborhoods where most cautious people would not travel.

At one housing project two teenage girls told outreach case manager Maria Gilliam about a friend who ran away from home.

Later that night Gilliam found the girl in another part of town and offered her counseling and warm clothes. The youth was glad to see Gilliam. She got in the van for a brief conference and reported that although she left home she is still attending school.

"I can't live with my mom because she drinks, then she starts hitting on me. I'm too big to be

hit, so I'll hit her back," she said.

The girl said she was staying with friends, but telephones her siblings and grandparents everyday to let them know she is OK.

\$400,000 grant

In June 1989, Covenant House was awarded a \$600,000 start-up grant from the New Jersey Department of Health to develop a statewide AIDS Outreach and Prevention Program. Covenant House supplemented the grant with \$400,000 that came from private donations, said James P. Gentile, the associate director of Covenant House New Jersey.

The New Jersey program includes outreach vans and storefront sites in Trenton, Newark and Atlantic City.

"The kids we deal with are often involved with drugs or prostitution. Both of those activities put them at risk of contracting the HIV virus," Gentile said.

The most recent statistics estimate that 43 percent of the youths Covenant House workers have seen on the streets either use intravenous drugs or engage in prostitution, or both, said Anne Wilson, Covenant House

communications coordinator for New Jersey.

Though none of these children exhibit outward signs of infection, more than half of them are at high risk of contracting the HIV virus, she said.

Cautious, but not afraid

The case workers said they are cautious, but not afraid in high crime areas. Despite recent reports of violence at Covenant House shelters in New York City, Lilly said she considers the job safe and personally does not know of any cases of Covenant House employees being seriously injured on the job.

The walk-in counseling center, a storefront office at 198 S. St. James Place, has a lounge, a reception area, a kitchen and office space. However, no beds are available. Homeless teenagers are referred to the JINS (Juviles In Need of Services) county shelter, the Salvation Army or the Rescue Mission. In rare cases, they are placed in a hotel overnight until other shelter is found, Lilly said.

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county residents, so if we have someone from out of the area they don't have top priority to stay there," she said.

Pregnant teenagers may find temporary shelter at the Salvation Army or the Rescue Mission, both of which are set up to care for women and children, she said.

Covenant House helps out-of-state youths by linking them up with transportation home. Some bus companies have programs that give runaways a free ticket home. Last month, Lilly arranged bus trips home for two California girls who ran away and found

themselves stranded in Atlantic City.

The organization has a 24-hour hot line at (800) 999-9999. The New York-based number is designed to link youths with local agencies and as an informal network between parents and children, Lilly said.

Covenant House does not provide in-depth counseling for youths addicted to drugs and alcohol, she said.

"Unless you have a lot of money, unfortunately, there is not much in the way of rehabilitation. And that is where the help is needed," Lilly said.