



January 12, 2009

## Help for troubled county youths

By *TIM ZATZARINY Jr.*  
*Staff Writer*

VINELAND -- There's no shortage of work for Covenant House's outreach staff in one of New Jersey's poorest counties.

Covenant House, an international charity, operates youth shelters in Atlantic City and Newark.

For years, Covenant House has done monthly outreach work in Cumberland County to try to identify young people who need food, help finding a job, or even just a warm place to stay.

Now, the charity wants to expand its mission here by hiring two-full time outreach staff whose work would be devoted to helping the county's young people.

Covenant House is trying to raise \$75,000 for the project, and has about \$7,000 so far, said Jennifer Williams, development manager for the Atlantic City location. Williams and other Covenant House staff spoke with The Daily Journal during a South Jersey Focus meeting last week.

In Atlantic City, Covenant House operates a 27-bed crisis shelter for young men and women under age 22, as well as a 20-bed transitional facility called Rites of Passage. The Atlantic City shelter celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

The bulk of the charity's clients are between 18 and 21, Williams said. There is no time limit on how long a client can remain at the shelter, but the average stay is about three months, she said.

The shelter often operates above capacity; six of its recent clients were from Cumberland County, Williams said.

"We don't turn anyone away," she said, adding the charity's clients include "kids trying to leave gangs and prostitutes trying to leave pimps."

Covenant House provides everything from food and shelter to legal services and job counseling to young people throughout South Jersey.

Nearly all of the charity's annual \$9 million budget -- which covers the Atlantic City and Newark locations -- comes from private donations; a small portion is made up of government grants, Williams said.

The charity decided to increase its presence in Cumberland County after staff attended an interfaith meeting of local clergy in Millville last spring.

"As we listened to the community, they all seemed to have the same concerns about their children," which include an increase in violence attributed to street gangs, said Alex Siniari, outreach manager for Covenant House Atlantic City.

During outreach missions, Covenant House staff travel in a van to gathering spots, such as Cumberland Mall in Vineland and Third Friday activities in Millville, in search of young people in need.

Mainly, the job involves locating at-risk youth by talking to others in the community, Siniari said.

"We don't go up to people and say, 'Hey, you look like you need help,'" he explained.

Siniari said outreach workers have encountered homeless youth living in woods and under bridges in Cumberland County.

Those who want help are driven to the shelter in Atlantic City or connected with local social service agencies.

Although donations to Covenant House have remained steady during the national economic downturn, the troubled times have had an impact on the shelter and its clients, Williams said.

Those clients are now competing for jobs with a growing number of older, more experienced Atlantic City casino workers who've been laid off from their jobs.

"Our youth are finding it very hard to get employment, which means they have to stay in our shelter longer," Williams said.

## Additional Facts

### MORE INFORMATION

- To contact Covenant House, call (609) 348-4070 or visit [www.covenanthousenj.org](http://www.covenanthousenj.org).
  - To make a donation to Covenant House Atlantic City, contact Jennifer Williams at (609) 348-1421, ext. 38 or [jawilliams@covenanthouse.org](mailto:jawilliams@covenanthouse.org).
-