

Judges get grant to cope with teen runaways

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

"What do you say to a child who runs away?" asks one of the songs from the Broadway musical "Runaways."

Oakland County Juvenile Court judges and officials ask the same question. Their answers aren't a panacea for the national problem of runaways, but they qualified the county for a \$17,000 federal grant.

That grant will finance nine full-time counselors and six short-term foster homes around the county.

YOUNG RUNAWAYS—mostly adolescents who flee their homes and families, are a problem in Oakland County. Status offenders, children who have run away from home or school, but have committed no crimes, accounted for 25 per cent of the juvenile court's business last year.

In many instances, according to Juvenile Court Judge Eugene Moore and status offender program supervisor Charles Ludwig, these children are sent to Oakland County's Children's Village, a general institution for the county's youthful troublemakers.

Instead, they want to funnel the children into foster homes. They label the homes "cooling off" places, sites where the children will be away from the problems that caused them to run away.

In the meantime, the nine caseworkers will work to solve the problems within the family.

WHEN IT COMES to status offenders, Ludwig said, the juvenile court system works in reverse. The children have committed no crime other than running away from a situation which

they can no longer tolerate, he said. "All of a sudden the system says, 'You're the guilty one,' when in fact, the situation has to be looked at much closer."

In many instances the runaways are sent to Children's Village. Officially it is called "detention."

When children are "detained," Ludwig said, they become angry—with their family, the court system and themselves.

"If the youngster's angry," the program supervisor said, "putting him into a situation where other kids are angry isn't going to help matters. When he's moved to Children's Village, he's meeting a conglomerate of youngster's with the same reactions. 'Put them all together and something's bound to rub off,' he said.

TO KEEP THEM out of Children's Village, Ludwig and Moore hope to sidetrack the runaways into temporary foster care homes.

"It's a way of giving us some time to work with the child and the parent," Ludwig said.

"We try to show the parents that time is on their side and that the situation isn't totally hopeless," he added. "Sometimes they get this terrible feeling of hopelessness and they just don't want to have anything to do with their child," he said.

THE GOAL of county caseworkers is to reunite the child with his family, Ludwig said they try to tell the parent, "Don't give up totally."

County workers have succeeded in reuniting 60 per cent of the 195 families with which they have worked since May.

While many parents refuse to take



JUDGE EUGENE MOORE
"Cooling off" houses

their children back, some children similarly refuse to go back.

Officials said sometimes the runaways' refusals are not without good reason. Some runaways are neglected,

beaten or sexually abused. One prosecutor said a majority of all runaways were abused in some way.

While county workers aim for a reconciliation, it is the foster parents who shoulder the responsibility of being a temporary home to the homeless.

"Most runaways have very low self-respect. They don't like themselves. They think that others don't like them," Moore said.

"The foster parent can be a positive adult figure. He shows the kid a person he can model himself after," he added.

WHAT IS NEEDED, Ludwig said, is time. "We don't want you to be a psychiatrist or a psychologist. We just want foster parents to be patient," he said.

Thus far, Oakland juvenile court has had problems recruiting foster parents. The program has only one foster home in low and status offenders continue to be sent to Children's Village.

One problem is that many prospective foster parents are not interested in parenting teenagers. Most status offenders are 15 and 16 years old.

Another problem, Ludwig said, is money. Most foster parents don't expect to make a financial killing, but in an inflation-conscious society few people are willing to take on that added responsibility.

The juvenile court's new federally-funded program, however, attempts to minimize the financial impact. Not only will foster parents be reimbursed for daily expenses, they will also receive weekly payments whether or not they have a child living with them.

Ludwig said the compensation was necessary because he asks that the foster parents be willing to take a child into their homes any time, day or night.

EVEN THOUGH Ludwig tries to minimize his reliance on altruism as a motivating factor, it is still the backbone of the appeal for more foster care volunteers.

Instead of asking people to be selfless, Christian or just neighborly, Ludwig informs prospective foster parents that their experiences in the program will help prepare them for careers in other child care-related fields.

In some cases, he said, this program

might meet the needs of some families who have no children.

"Some people want to be mothers or parents for only a while. The rest of the time they're looking for something different," Ludwig said.

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