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Attacking housing problem requires multipronged approach

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Every Tuesday and Thursday, Kids in Crisis Intervention Team opens the doors of a downtown Franklin storefront to a line of waiting teens and young adults.

The drop-in center is a place where Johnson County's homeless youth can get a free, hot meal. Showers and restrooms have been built in the back, if the teens need to clean up. Emergency provisions, such as toiletries, coats, blankets, pillows and sleeping bags, are available if they need it.

Volunteers can provide peanut butter, canned soups, canned meats and fruit for them to take with them.

"Every story is different. Every kid that comes in has different circumstances, a different need and a different situation in their life," said Dave Sever, board president for KIC-IT.

Three years after opening to serve homeless teens and young adults, KIC-IT is serving more people than ever before. To meet that expanding need, the agency is on the verge of major changes that could provide greater stability to the county's transient population.

The agency would like to build a shelter to give temporary housing to those who need it. It is also expanding its scope to help even more homeless youth regain footing in their lives through job skill training, mentoring and emergency food and clothing.

County homelessness advocates are banding together in the hope of finding the best way to provide the help to people need.

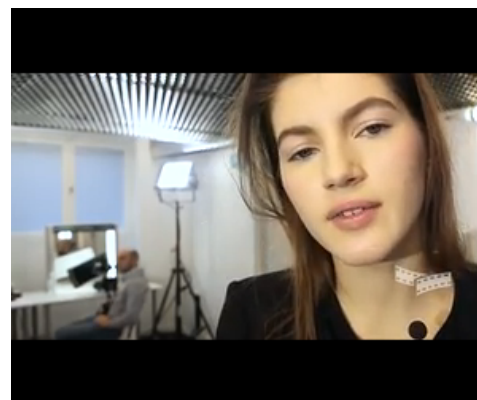
"Franklin is such a giving community, and there are so many people who want to help. If we can just figure out the puzzle pieces, we can make the best use of those resources," said Cheryl Sever, a volunteer for KIC-IT. "It seems so within reach of moving forward in a positive way."

'The problem is real'

In 2013, Johnson County had about 600 students who were identified as homeless — kids who were sleeping on a friend's couch, living out of a motel or sleeping in their cars.

Of that number, 300 attended Franklin Community Schools, said Kimberly Spurling, community outreach coordinator for Franklin Community Schools and executive director of KIC-IT.

That number has climbed every year since 2007, Spurling said.



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"Just because Johnson County's homelessness looks different than Marion County's does not mean that we don't have our fair share of homeless individuals and families," she said. "Johnson County may not have individuals living under bridges or underpasses, standing on street corners. But the problem is real."

In 2014, KIC-IT served nearly 250 young adults. Within that group, 140 were existing clients who had come to KIC-IT in the past. But the agency also served more than 100 people for the first time.

KIC-IT specializes in emergency provisions for the young people who need it. But to really attack the core of the problem, the kids who come to KIC-IT need a mentor and life coach to help steer their lives in a more positive direction.

Officials meet with the teens and young adults, all between the ages of 16 and 25, just to talk with them. They can help connect them with referrals to social service agencies to help with the issues they're dealing with.

Many times, their repeat clients come back because they know they can get out of the cold for an hour or so, get a warm meal and talk to people who care about their problems, said Sever, a former assistant superintendent for Franklin schools.

"Many of these kids, for whatever reason, don't have a positive role model," he said. "They've found themselves in a situation where they have to fend for themselves. They've lost a job, are looking for work, dropped out of school. Sometimes, they're in trouble with the law. They need a supportive adult."

'Nowhere else to go'

KIC-IT was founded in 2011, after social service agencies in the county realized there was a gap for the help that could be provided to homeless young people.

Teenagers who are 17 and younger can be placed in the host home of a volunteer through Youth Connections to receive emergency shelter. Other programs for adults deal with families, leaving young single people with no place to go.

KIC-IT is designed to help youths who are 16 to 25 years old. It could work in tandem with other homelessness groups, such as Christian Help, to ensure that each age group was eligible for some kind of assistance.

But when Christian Help closed in 2014, KIC-IT became the only agency in Johnson County that specifically served the homeless community. That has led to an increase in older homeless individuals coming to the group for help as well.

"They are outside of KIC-IT's age demographic, but they still come to see us because they have nowhere else to go," Spurling said. "Although we can't provide monetary homeless assistance we never let them leave without something; warm meal, clothing, hygiene products and community resources."

'One of our top needs'

The United Way of Johnson County also maintains a help line that local residents can call if they need information on where to get help. Though callers ask about everything from substance abuse to assistance for senior citizens, one of the biggest requests is for housing, said executive director Nancy Plake.

To try and get a better grasp of the problem the county faces, the United Way organized a comprehensive study on homelessness in 2014. The report will likely be compiled by mid-February.

Though not yet able to provide exact statistics on the homeless issue in Johnson County, the United Way could use anecdotal evidence showing how vital it is to work on the problem.

"It's one of our top needs," Plake said. "So many people are calling us looking for housing."

One of the foremost priorities for the group, and other advocates in the county, is putting together a shelter to help homeless youth.

Johnson County is the only county in the area around Indianapolis that does not have a homeless shelter.

"We have to show the members of our community who are struggling that we care about them and want to see them succeed, and we can't do that without transitional housing and a homeless shelter," Spurling said. "How can we expect individuals and families who are struggling with homeless issues to succeed if they are constantly worrying about where they are going to sleep at night?"

A savings account has been started by KIC-IT to keep funds that have been donated specifically toward a shelter. That money will not be touched until the organization can partner with churches and other agencies

to start one.

"Whether it's an overnight shelter, or an ongoing shelter, there is certainly a need," Sever said.

Unified efforts

The KIC-IT board already have inspected properties in the Franklin and Whiteland areas that could potentially serve as a shelter, but none was in the condition to feasibly work without thousands of dollars of work, Sever said.

Management of the shelter is another obstacle to getting one started. In order to help the homeless in the best way possible, the shelter would need to be open daily.

That would require a full-time director to oversee the operation of the house. All of KIC-IT's officials are volunteers, so arrangements have to be made to hire someone.

In order to be successful, KIC-IT officials realize they cannot stand alone, Sever said. Part of their focus has been on partnering with other entities, mostly churches, throughout the county to pool resources and provide the widest net of assistance that they can.

Hopewell Presbyterian Church, Grace United Methodist Church and SS. Francis and Clare Roman Catholic Church are just a few that have teamed with KIC-IT to work on the homeless problem.

The organization also infused its own leadership with new ideas, increasing the size of the board of directors, taking on five new members who bring different perspectives and solutions to the homeless problem.

Each member then approaches a different aspect of KIC-IT's mission, so that they can come together to share their ideas during monthly meetings.

"The bottom line is getting ourselves organized, so that collectively, we can do something more permanent," Sever said.

Those who deal with homelessness see a problem that is growing month by month, and it's not going away, Spurling said. Solving the issue will require the entire community — not just a few individuals and agencies — to acknowledge it, and work together to ensure that no one is left sleeping in a tent or their car.

"There isn't a day that goes by that I don't receive a phone call with someone struggling from homeless-related issues," Spurling said. "We need better support from our community, local business, churches and public officials to rally behind KIC-IT, United Way and other agency's homeless efforts."

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