



MENTAL HEALTH

Pathway to Independence

Bill Wilson Center Provides Support and Housing To Guide Transition-Age Youth

By Christina Boufis

Krystal McCrary found herself at a crossroads. As a child, she was removed from an unsafe home where her parents abused drugs. She bounced from a shelter to a foster home — and finally was sent to live with her grandparents. But at the age of 18, she was emancipated by the foster care system. She was no longer eligible for the system’s dependency services and was provided with no means to support herself.

Then a social worker referred her to Bill Wilson Center (BWC), a multiservice agency founded in 1973 that has helped thousands of homeless, runaway and foster youth in Santa Clara County.

“I was really lost when I came to Bill Wilson Center and

didn’t have a sense of direction,” the 24-year-old McCrary said. “I worked part time at a video store and was seeking full-time employment but didn’t really have the skills or know-how to get a job that paid enough to cover my rent.”

In June 2010, BWC received a three-year, \$180,000 core operating support grant from TCWF to sustain drop-in and supportive housing services for transition-age youth in Santa Clara County.

“Bill Wilson Center is a vital institution serving transition-age youth in California,” TCWF Program Director Jeffrey S. Kim said. “It provides a comprehensive array of services for former foster youth and runaway/homeless youth so they can rebuild their lives.”



The agency serves more than 10,000 clients per year through its 19 programs, including the only homeless shelter for runaway youth in the county and a drop-in center in downtown San Jose that offers a range of supportive mental health and health care services, employment counseling and case management.

It also operates a Transitional Housing Program designed for homeless youth and provides Transitional Housing Plus (THP-Plus) programming — the California Department of Social Services’ two-year program for transition-age youth ages 18-24, who are exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

When they don’t have supportive services, “we know what happens with a lot of foster kids,” said Sparky Harlan, BWC executive director. “They end up in jail or homeless.”

“ I got a sense of who I was and what I was capable of.

Through counseling, housing and educational programs and services, the agency provides a safety net for these young adults.

Lynn Morison, director of Transitional Living Services, said that when youth enter the THP-Plus program, they are immediately connected to — and meet frequently with — a case manager.


Together they “work on getting housing, setting up goals, figuring out how to get a job [or] get registered for school,” Morrison said.

Youth also receive money for rent and pay program fees that are returned when they leave so they will be in a position to support themselves.

McCrary was one of the first participants in BWC’s THP-Plus program. While she learned valuable household, financial and time-management skills at THP-Plus, she gained insight about herself.

“I got a sense of who I was and what I was capable of,” she said, including realizing a goal of attending college, something she never thought possible.

Today McCrary works as a case manager at BWC helping others like herself.

“I’m just lucky and fortunate to be able to give back to a program that gave me so much,” she said. 

A HELP LINE FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY YOUTH

Through BWC’s Contact Cares program, phone counselors are available 24 hours a day and seven days a week to provide youth of all ages in Santa Clara County with a confidential way to get help.

24-7 Line for Youth

(888) 247-7717

A hotline for youth ages 7-24.

Crisis Line

(408) 850-6125

A hotline for anyone experiencing depression, anxiety, grief, loneliness, parental stress or going through hard times.

Anti-Hate Hotline

(408) 279-0111

A service for listening, reporting and follow-up of incidences of discrimination and hate crimes.

Centre Cares HIV/AIDS Hotline

(408) 850-6179

A hotline for people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS.

Case Manager Angela Martinez talks with youth outside Bill Wilson Center’s San Jose drop-in center, one of 19 programs designed to support former foster youth and runaway/homeless youth in Santa Clara County.

