

'RYSE' Up!

Residential Youth Services and Empowerment (RYSE) aims to help young adults leave the streets.

PHOTOS: BODIE COLLINS

Fueled by a desire to do more to help homeless youth—who, according to Point-In-Time data, often do not seek help from adult shelters—RESIDENTIAL YOUTH SERVICES AND EMPOWERMENT was born last June.

Located on the grounds of Kawaiola Youth and Family Wellness Center, the non-profit organization works with young adults ages 18-24, offering respite from life on the streets in the form of two levels of support.

First, participants may simply use RYSE facilities as an immediate solution should they need a place to sleep, shower and eat (dinner and breakfast are provided).

Those who are ready to commit to changing their lives, on the other hand, may immerse themselves in services that including getting to occupy their own room, hands-on life lessons and access to programs made possible by collaborations with the state Department of Education, local businesses and other agencies. Partnerships with the likes of Buzz's Original Steak House and Pua Lani Landscape Design, for example, have led to employment opportunities for RYSE youth, while two young adults recently graduated from Kailua High School.

"It speaks volumes to the collaboration and the effort that the community has done to just wrap their arms around RYSE and our kids and what we're trying to do," says Carla Houser, RYSE executive director.

And though it hasn't been very long since RYSE hit the ground running, it sure has accomplished a lot, to hear Houser tell it.

In its first year, the organization offered its services to more than 60 young adults. Seventeen have either found permanent housing or have been reunited with their families.

RYSE also recently expanded and now is able to accommodate 30 individuals (20 young men and 10 young women), and has plans to open a clinic on site that will offer adolescent-specific health care services.

So to see how far RYSE has come is, in a word, amazing, says Houser.

"I tell our kids often I'm not sure they realize how lucky there are to have 13, 14 adults who are willing to stand beside them, let them make mistakes, fail, try again and just meet them with unconditional positive regard and support," she adds.

Of course, the organization always could use additional help from the community be it in the form of partnerships and donations of supplies or personal time. Volunteers, explains Houser, should be committed to working with RYSE youth long-term and could be tasked with doing everything from helping participants work on resumes and job applications to day-to-day tasks. More importantly, volunteers should be ready to lead by example.

"We clean bathrooms; we do dishes," says Houser. "The idea is that we want to kind of help these young people learn a lot of the independent living skills that maybe they haven't had a chance to learn ... something that we might take for granted—like doing a load of laundry or washing dishes—if they've never learned it or never had a positive adult in their life to guide them, that's kind of what we're here for, really, is just to walk beside them in this journey as they figure things out."

All of it, says Houser, leads to rewards that are aplenty.

"I just feel really honored that they allow us to be a part of their lives," she says. "So many of these kids have experienced a lot of junk at the hands of adults, people that were supposed to protect them."

"Every morning when I walk in and see a house full of 30 young people, and they're making their breakfast, they're blow-drying their hair, they're getting ready for school or work or life—it's really eye-opening because I have to take a step back and think to myself, 'If we weren't here, where would these kids be?'" ●

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RYSE, VISIT RYSEHAWAII.ORG OR EMAIL INFO@RYSEHAWAII.ORG.

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