

CAU in the News

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Community Access Unlimited's mission is to provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.

COUNTY LEADERS SEE FIRST-HAND HOW YOUTH SHELTER CHANGES LIVES ***Community Access Unlimited hosts freeholders and juvenile judge***

Elizabeth, NJ – February 8, 2013 – Union County Freeholders Bruce Bergen and Vernell Wright and Union County Family Division Judge Robert Kirsch yesterday visited the Union County Youth Shelter in Elizabeth to see first-hand how the facility and its programs and staff are positively impacting the lives of the youth that spend time there.

The Union County Youth Shelter cares for youths aged 13-17, who arrive at the facility either referred by the Family Crisis Intervention Unit of the Union County Youth Services Bureau, ordered there by the juvenile justice system as an alternative to the Union County Juvenile Detention Center or simply on their own, often estranged from their families. The shelter serves as transitional housing for up to 30 days for up to four youths at a time.

The shelter is operated by Community Access Unlimited (CAU), which has run the facility on behalf of the county since 2006. A **staff of 14 provide independent living skills, counseling, on-site schooling by a state-certified teacher or at the youth's home school, family counseling and, if necessary, intervention.**

"We work with them to figure out their next steps," said Sid Blanchard, CAU executive director. "We get families reunited and enable them to figure out how to live together. Many will see they're being given a second chance. "Our counselors try to get them to see how the decisions they made got them here and how they have to make better decisions. The hope is they will go home and implement the skills they have learned here."

In 2012 the shelter housed 41 youths for some period. Of those, 21 reunited with their families, 11 were placed in non-emergency housing and seven simply departed, requiring no additional action. Only two returned to detention.

"Having this available as an alternative to incarceration is a great advantage," Bergen said. "If you have the right kid it's absolutely better than having the kid locked up." Kirsch, who sends many of the shelter's youths to the facility, agrees. "I really value this place and (their) work," he said. "There are some (other) services I don't use because they don't work. That's not here. Even if I only have a couple kids here, those are two I know will be in a clean, safe, humane and educational environment. That's invaluable."

The shelter also serves as a vital safe stop for youth who simply leave home due to some crisis in their family or feelings of estrangement from parents, according to Blanchard. "Kids never run to a place, they run from a place," he said. "They end up in the street, couch surfing and eventually homeless. We're trying to help these naturally homeless kids before they find themselves in the system or in court."

CAU is ideally suited to run a youth shelter, according to Tanya Johnson, senior assistant executive director of youth services at the agency. The agency serves people with disabilities and at-risk youth, providing housing support and life-skills training to enable them to live independently in the community. "We are in the business of providing shelter and training," she said. "We also run dozens of programs and own more than 200 residential properties throughout Union County so we know how to run a shelter and provide the services these young people require."

Yet the agency cannot succeed alone and depends on collaboration with government, other human services organizations and educators throughout the county, Johnson said. The shelter accepts referrals from the county Division of Child Protection and Permanency; law enforcement departments; teachers, school social workers and administrators; and neighbors. The shelter also opens its doors to youths coming in off the street.

"Homelessness, family discord and kids getting into trouble knows no race or economic status," Johnson said. "We have youth come to us from every town in Union County. All these kids are our kids, the community's kids. We want to provide the resources to make them safe. And we want everyone to know we're here."



Union County Freeholders Union County Freeholders Vernell Wright and Bruce Bergen listen to Sid Blanchard, executive director of Community Access Unlimited (CAU), talk about the programs of the Union County Youth Shelter, which CAU operates.