Bridge Over Troubled Water, a Boston, Massachusetts agency serving homeless and runaway youth.

OVERVIEW

Teens on the streets of Boston have very critical needs. Unlike many adult homeless persons, these youth are not necessarily there because of socioeconomic reasons. Most end up on the streets because of emotional dynamics and family dysfunction. Bridge Over Troubled Water (commonly known as "The Bridge") is a nationally recognized agency which effectively meets these initial critical needs of homeless and runaway youth, while also offering multiple opportunities for these young people to form consistent therapeutic relationships with trained professionals.

PROGRAM GOALS

"The Bridge" reports that it was founded to "do whatever may be necessary or desirable in assisting youth who are on the streets with no one to comfort them to achieve a place in society as normal and useful citizens." Although there are several ongoing Bridge"programs," the youth are not required to be in an official program to receive assistance. Most of the services are offered at no cost to the youth.

PROGRAM METHODS

The programs within the structure of "The Bridge" fall into one of seven areas:

- **Street outreach.** This is often the initial contact made with the teen. Three full-time streetworkers work within several program areas to build relationships with homeless and runaway youth. The street outreach, by its unstructured and fluid nature, permeates the other six program areas. Many youth who use the agency first learned of its services from a streetworker.

- **Medical and dental services.** A nursing station and full dental clinic are located in the main office. A medical van works the streets five days a week, staffed with doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, and one street worker. Close to 10,000 medical visits were logged in 1995, serving an estimated 2,306 youth. All medical personnel are all volunteers.

- **Runaway services.** The Bridge always encourages family reconciliation. If that is not possible, other options are explored. Two full-time runaway counselors are on staff; each alternate being "on-call," providing 24-hour action to runaway cases. The runaway services are provided in a secluded area of the main office, away from all other programming. In 1995, 363 youth came through this program.
- **Counseling services.** Counselors, all full-time, provide free substance abuse counseling, survival aid, and referrals. Youth are encouraged to make appointments, but drop-in visits are quickly given attention. All other assistance and services are obtained through a counselor (with the exception of the medical van). This helps to monitor youth and discourage unhealthy dependence on the program. The intake/counseling facility serviced 2,332 youth who made up a total case-load of 19,909 individual visits in 1995. 2,147 Referrals were made to 304 different agencies on behalf of homeless and runaway youth.

- **Family Life Center.** This facility provides pregnant and parenting teens information and support, advocacy, and counseling. Child care is provided for any youth while they are in counseling or in a Bridge program. 178 Mothers and 170 children made 2,679 visits to the Family Life Center in 1995.

- **Education and Pre-Employment Program.** Basic education, GED preparation, and job-readiness preparation are provided. In addition to preparing for the GED, classes are offered in word processing and basic job skills. 329 Youth used this service in 1995. A full-time financial aid resource person is available to assist youth in finding financing for college once they pass the GED.

- **Residential component.** A facility is housed away from the main complex in Brighton, Massachusetts. Two programs are offered: Phase I provides safe housing to homeless youth and single mothers. This program adheres to a strict regimen with a great deal of supervision and responsibility. Phase II, only offered to those who have completed the previous phase, offers a less structured and supervised living situation. This is operated as a transitional living program; participants are allowed a limited stay in Phase II. A total of 101 teens and children were housed at some time last year through this program.

**PROGRAM OPERATION**

Bridge Over Troubled Water runs on a yearly budget of approximately $2 million. This funding predominantly comes from private donations. Some of the programs (the GED program, for example) are funded through the help of the United Way. One cannot overlook the impact of volunteers on the success of the agency. In 1995 alone, 170 volunteers logged in 1,679 volunteer visits totaling 5,810 volunteer hours. All programs and offices are run out of the downtown facility, with the exception of the residential programs. The agency is led by a board of directors and an executive director. There are seven people who oversee the day-to-day operations, including the clinical director who directly supervises all clinical work. Thirty-nine other workers provide the services offered through the agency.
PROGRAM TESTIMONIES

Bridge over Troubled Water has been nationally recognized. Most recently the agency was awarded the Hilary E.C. Milar Award for innovative approaches to adolescent health care by the National Society of Adolescent Medicine. Numerous times over the past twenty-six years of its existence, staff members have testified before federal committees and congressional sub-committees on the needs of homeless and runaway youth.

IMPLICATIONS

1. This program is aggressive in providing medical and dental care for homeless and runaway youth that would otherwise go unmet. This agency is doing a wonderful job of finding creative and nonthreatening methods to deliver needed services to this population.

2. Program participants are treated with dignity and respect. Extreme care is taken to ensure confidentiality. The goal is to empower youth to return to a productive life, not to continue down their dangerous paths.

3. Although this agency was born from the work of the three nuns, it has no connection to a church or religious organization. Its presence and success begs the question of the presence and influence of the church on this "least of these" population.

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