



Cindy Leisy, the group home director for YSS.

delinquency problem, as alternative to the state training schools. Programs like Freeway serve as "an escape valve—a facility where real help can be applied toward solving problems without stigma," he said.

Arnot said that of the other youth agencies, some "haven't provided what they say they do, and some are open during business hours only, which should be changed. We also need to get more services out to the rural areas—the needs are just as great outside the cities, but many of the Lancaster County agencies don't cover them very well."

The Freeway Station is basically a shelter for runaway children. It is open and staffed 24 hours a day. The station has some requirements of its temporary live-ins: he or she must agree to a check for drugs when entering, to a call to parents and police so he stays off the missing persons list, and to allow the staff to try to help with the problem. While there, residents may continue to go to school or go through another educational process. Kids awaiting placement in foster homes or group homes may also spend time at the Freeway Station. Usually residents are there no more than a week. The goal is to get the children back home.

The two group homes, one each for boys and girls, take in youth at court recommendation or by referral from the welfare department. They handle kids from 13 to 17 for six to eight months at a time, after which the children may go home or be placed in a foster home. If they are 17 when they leave, they may live on their own, with supervision. Each house has two houseparents and an assistant houseparent.

Cindy Leisy, the group home director for YSS, said the homes "are sometimes the only alternative to Geneva (girl's reformatory) or Kearney (boy's reformatory) or the Regional Center for kids coming through the courts. But the kids have to want to be in the homes—they have to agree to try with our system."

According to Leisy, the houseparents have access to the complete social history of each resident, allowing them to get a better picture of the problem. Reality therapy is used in counseling the kids,

Decisions about the program are made by a board of directors made up of 40 members from the community, including ten high school students.

"Since it's a program for and about them," Arnot said, "We like to have youth participation."

When a client comes to YSS he or she is assigned a case manager, who visits the home of the youth at least once and helps link the child and his family to the needed community service. The case manager later follows up to make sure they obtained the necessary services.

"This is our way of making sure the agencies provide what they are supposed to," Arnot said. "We also try to connect the family unit with the necessary counseling or other services. We try to hold the primary social unit (the family) together."

The courts, too, have been cooperative. "The courts have not developed a paternalistic attitude to service agencies—this is healthy," Arnot said.

Judge Nuernberger (separate juvenile court of Lancaster County) said the YSS program provided one answer to the



Doug Pedell is an assistant houseparent at the boys' group home, where the atmosphere is open but "rules are rules," he says.

which "Emphasizes the positive aspects of their behavior rather than the negative aspects."

The boys and girls in the homes go to school, have jobs, and can earn points that count for privileges, such as having visitors, going on dates, or going home for a weekend.

"The whole point of the homes," Leisy said, "is to keep the child in his community, where he can learn to deal effectively with his problems, rather than shutting them in with him."

There are no locks on doors to prevent the residents from leaving. "We do have a fairly constant runaway problem," said Leisy, "but most of the people who come to the houses are serious about trying to straighten out."

The homes are nicely furnished with all the comforts of middle America—color television, stereos, and air conditioning. The kids in the homes have to do some of the daily chores, and they have specific days to cook or clean. They lounge around the homes, doing whatever is normal for young people everywhere—hanging out and

draping themselves on the furniture in the odd, boneless postures that only an adolescent can maintain, smoking, throwing friendly insults, laughing, pouting.

Doug, the assistant houseparent at the boy's group home, said, "You have to be very consistent with the rules. The guys will push you clear over the edge if you waiver."

Sheri, assistant houseparent at the girls' group home and a UNL student, said:

"There is a highly emotional and tense atmosphere here—the girls put pressure on us to bend and the only recourse is to stick to the rules. Living here has also

changed my personality some, since I have to think carefully about what I say before I say it."

When asked about what they thought of the group home system, the boys complained about being able to work but having to save most of the money, and about the "hard-ass" attitude of the staff. The girls were mostly non-committal, but one said, "I've been to Geneva and the Regional Center, and I'd MUCH rather be here."

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