

No bars, no cells used in center for kids

BY JOANNE YOUNG

It's a typical summer day for kids. One young man stretches lazily on big, overstuffed pillows watching an old rerun on TV. A tow-headed teen across the room sits with his ear glued to the phone. A young woman, six yards away, plays Break-out on the video game console.

Typical activities for most teens — but there is a difference.

These young people can't run to the park for a softball game with friends, or cruise O Street in hot cars.

They are residents of the Jennie B. Harrell Attention Center for Youth, charged with violating the rules of society and laws of Nebraska. They're awaiting trial, or placement in a group or foster home, or correctional facility.

There are no bars on the windows, and the kids don't view the staff as guards, said Candy Thomas, the center's volunteer coordinator. And there are no cells. They're called single rooms.

Still, each room is always locked. Only a staff member can let the kids in and out of their rooms.

They are subjected to a "strip search" upon admission to the center, and are closely supervised.

"One of the common problems these kids have is running away," Ms. Thomas said.

That's one of the reasons for tight security.

Girls and boys at the center were charged with a variety of offenses from truancy and running away to a variety of law violations, like auto theft, armed robbery and rape.

Residents at the center may stay from a day to several months, said Ms. Thomas, with the average stay being five to seven days.

"There is one famous case," she said, "that the kid stayed 500 days. But that is extremely rare."

The number of youths at the attention center varies from day to day, she said. On Monday, for example, there were five teens. One girl, a perky brunette who looked like Joanie Cunningham from Happy Days, was being discharged from the center that afternoon, on her way to a halfway house to await placement in a group or foster home.

The girl seemed hopeful about a foster home placement, but was cautioned by a staff member not to get her hopes too high.

The center relies on volunteers to fill the gaps in the attention given youths at the center, Ms. Thomas said.

Officials said the center is located in a residential area of Lincoln to trigger community involvement and support.

And, Ms. Thomas said, the interior structure of the building is designed to make the environment as homelike as possible for the kids. There are bright colors, carpeting and windows—not a typical lockup. The recreation area has many games and equipment,

and the entertainment center would please most teens.

But the center is not without criticism from the community.

"Some people believe we should have bars on the windows and chains on the walls," Ms. Thomas said.

Officials at the center obviously don't feel that way.

"We expect a certain type of behavior from these kids," Ms. Thomas said, "and we usually get it."

She said residents aren't punished at the center. There are two isolation rooms which are "hardly ever used," and used only to calm the kids, protecting them from themselves and other kids.

"The staff never uses physical or verbal abuse," she said.

"This is a good atmosphere to wait in," Ms. Thomas said, "It's safe and fun."

The attention center is looking for volunteers this summer to serve as role models for the kids.

"Because they are role models, volunteers have to fill out an application and list three references," Ms. Thomas said. "And they must be at least 19-years-old."

Workers at the center said volunteers are vital to the center's growth and progress, and at the same time, volunteers benefit by improving their human relations skills, get practical experience and a job reference.

Ms. Thomas said volunteers have nothing

to fear by working with the residents.

"We have never had a volunteer assaulted," she said. "Some (volunteers) are afraid of getting hurt, but these kids are like the kids down the street."

Volunteers are given guidelines on what to expect from the residents and what the residents expect from them.

Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Ms. Candy Thomas or the director, Jon Hill at 471-7090. The center is located at 2220 S. 10th St., in Lincoln.

New ETV program will premier on Monday

"Reading Rainbow," a new 15-program public television series, premiers Monday on the Nebraska Educational Television Network.

The program, which is an attempt to motivate children to read during the summer months, is co-produced by Nebraska's Great Plains National Instruction Library and public television station WNED-TV of Buffalo, N.Y.

"Reading Rainbow" will be shown Monday through Friday at 9:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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SUMMER NEBRASKAN

The Summer Nebraskan is a student newspaper published each Thursday as a laboratory project by School of Journalism classes in Advertising, Editing, Photography and Reporting.

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