

GUIDE Structured Shelter Passes Twenty-Two Year Landmark!

By Sarah Smee, March 2004



GUIDE Catonsville Structured Shelter

This past fall it was announced that the GUIDE Catonsville Structured Shelter which has just passed its twenty-second birthday, was awarded a new three-year contract by the Department of Juvenile Services to continue providing services at its Baltimore County home. The structured shelter serves about 100 boys between the ages of 12 and 18 annually from throughout Maryland, but predominately those from Frederick, Carroll, Prince George's, Montgomery, and Baltimore Counties, and Baltimore City.

Stays in the home are temporary and average just 30 days, although some youth may



reside for up to 90 days. The boys have come to the attention of juvenile

authorities for problems related to inappropriate

behaviors caused by making poor decisions within the family, school, or local community. Youth come to the program when juvenile service officials determine that the youths and their families will be best served if the youths live outside of the home temporarily and until other plans can be made. Despite the relatively short time in residence, in many cases the shelter is able to help these youths begin to turn their lives around. Shelter Director Wally Brengle, who has more than 20 years experience working with troubled teens, and the rest of the staff work

hard to provide structure, high expectations, and accountability, all of which encourage residents to develop respect for themselves and others.

The GUIDE Shelter follows a model of "balanced and restorative justice," and provides one step along the continuum of care offered through Maryland's juvenile justice system. Mr. Brengle attributes GUIDE's success at the shelter to the program's internal structure and the staff relationships that are formed with the program youth. GUIDE provides a variety of cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities while addressing issues such as anger management, violence prevention, conflict resolution, victim awareness, job readiness, and life and health skills. Staff work with the youths to help them understand new ways of interacting with the community through discussion groups and required community service.

For example twice a week residents serve as volunteers at Paul's Place, a soup kitchen in Baltimore City. This is one of the most meaningful community service activities for the boys since they are able to see how difficult life can be for some individuals when things don't go right and the importance of making good decisions. By serving in this way, the boys have a chance to relate to the homeless clients and become sensitive to their circumstances. By completing meaningful service activities the boys are able to feel a degree of success and pride.

All of the shelter's residents are school age, though many have had negative experiences with education. Sandra Sacra, the shelter's teacher since 1994, has designed a unique program to help students improve their skills and prepare for the return to their regular school. An emphasis is placed on individualized learning. When each student enters the shelter, he is given a placement test to determine his strengths and weaknesses. The low student to staff ratio (no more than five to one) allows the teacher and her assistant, William



Brayboy, to give students the extra attention they need but probably haven't received before entering the program. Learning can be fun at the shelter, especially when special contests and educational games are part of both school and recreational activities. Though the students' stays are short, last year of those youth remaining thirty days or more, 72% showed improvement in reading and 78% showed improvement in math skills when they left the program!

GUIDE's plan for helping troubled youths does not end at the shelter's door. Jonathan Ward, the shelter's social worker and Assistant Director, meets with family members during the child's stay to address family issues and provide support for both parent and child. This interaction with parents and other relatives helps to heal family wounds and begins the process of bringing the family back together. Healthy family interaction can go a long way in preventing further problems.

The Catonsville Structured Shelter has been making a difference in children's lives for more than twenty years. The new contract cycle from the Department of Juvenile Services will ensure that GUIDE will be able to continue providing these young men with a supportive, healthy environment in which to begin making changes in the way they think and act.