

CHAPTER THREE – THE ALTERNATIVE HOUSE PROGRAM

Alternative House's Emergency Shelter for Teenagers is a two-week crisis intervention program for young people 13 to 17 years old. A 24-hour hotline and walk-in counseling for adolescents and adults supplements the residential program. Alternative House was established 28 years ago, in 1971. A group of churches in McLean, VA was providing informal aid to teenage runaways, in the form of food, clothing, and shelter at various churches and parishioners' homes. They soon realized that the problem needed a formal program in order to provide help to local runaway adolescents. Alternative House was formed as a non-profit agency run by volunteers in trailers on church grounds. Approximately three years later, one of these volunteers applied for a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. Alternative House received Runaway and Homeless Youth Funding in order to begin expanding and serving the needs of runaway youth in a more consistent and effective manner. Alternative House has been licensed by the Department of Mentally Retarded, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Services for the last fifteen years.

Teens assisted by Alternative House typically face crises in one of five areas. One area is abuse or neglect. When an abused young person comes to the Emergency Shelter, Alternative House's first priority is providing a safe place to stay, both in the short and long term. Counselors work closely with staff at Child Protective Services, other social service providers, the young person, and the family to develop the best long-term plan for the teen.

The second area is family crisis. Frequently, teens signal a need for help by running away. They may leave when they feel their problems are out of control or insurmountable. The primary needs for these adolescents are better living situations at home and better communication with parents or guardians. Alternative House counselors and family therapists work closely with both the teen and the family to help increase their knowledge of personal strengths and resources to help them resolve conflicts and difficulties.

For other adolescents coming into the program, issues concerning delinquent or risky behavior are of primary concern. In many cases, Alternative House offers an

effective option to the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Counselors work with these youths to help them recognize how their behavior affects both their lives and the lives of others.

Some teens come to the shelter because of homelessness. Adolescents pushed out or removed from their homes at an early age find help at the Emergency Shelter. Teens may leave because of family abuse, neglect, or the inability of a parent to care for them. Many of these teens are homeless. Others have been taken out of one unacceptable home situation and have been placed in an inappropriate or unsuitable setting. When faced with a second unsuitable home, a young person often leaves for the streets. These “twice” homeless youth may face short-term as well as chronic homelessness. Alternative House provides short-term shelter and works with the young person and with other agencies to find ways to meet their long-term needs.

Lastly, Alternative House serves families with psychiatric issues. Often, parents and teens arrive at the shelter with undiagnosed psychiatric disorders. The therapist serves as a resource for preliminary assessments and referrals for more extensive evaluations. Alternative House has served as the impetus for mental health treatment for many families over the years.

For all of these young people, Alternative House provides a safe, stable, homelike environment. Teens receive appropriate adult supervision, nourishing food, clothing, and safe shelter. Within this environment, teens can begin to address the issues that brought them to the Emergency Shelter. The staff at Alternative House comprise one of the most important components to providing teens the services they need.

The Alternative House staff consists of six full-time counselors who must have a Bachelors degree and at least one year of related experience with severely emotionally disturbed teens. The full-time staff are supplemented with many relief staff that work part-time to assist when additional staff support is needed (e.g. open shifts, 1:1 with teens). Relief staff have the same requirements for employment that full-time staff have. Alternative House also uses high school, undergraduate and graduate level interns. Peer counselors are an additional resource for the staff. They are teens who are former graduates of the program or who are peer counselors in the local high schools.

In addition to the counselors and interns, there are currently two Licensed Masters of Social Work who serve as individual and family therapists for the shelter. The Program Coordinator works with the Director of Shelter Services to ensure quality of care. The Clinical Director supervises all of the counseling and clinical staff. The Executive Director serves as the pinnacle of the Alternative House staff hierarchy.

Staff are trained using a flexible format. Typically, the Program Coordinator and the Director of Shelter Services debrief new staff and guide them through a typical day. Trainees then shadow staff for at least forty-eight hours before they are allowed to serve a shift alone. There is a manual at the shelter called the “Cool Book.” This manual explains every procedure in minute detail and serves as a reference for employees on day-to-day operating matters. Staff are also educated regarding the agency’s approach to serving youth and families.

Alternative House uses a “family systems” approach in its programs. Rather than looking at the issues raised by a young person strictly as an individual matter, a family systems approach recognizes the interdependent workings of the family. Family relationships can influence individual behavior as much as one individual’s behavior can affect the family. In addition, environmental, social and psychological factors all play a part in the complex relationships in a family. A family systems approach recognizes and incorporates all these factors. Because of this family systems model, Alternative House requires two family counseling sessions with each client family that participates in the program.

Alternative House Mission Statement and Goals

All Alternative House programs are based on the belief that individuals and families can make positive changes. Programs strive to empower teenagers to build on their strengths, develop resiliency, and implement change. Daily activities are designed to encourage the development of constructive decision-making skills and respect for the rights of others. Effective methods of dealing with anger and conflict are stressed, and independent living skills also are encouraged. During a Federal Monitoring visit this year, the monitors noted that it is evident, from the program components and structure, that Alternative House has been engaging in “Positive Youth Development” for many

years. “Positive Youth Development” has recently become one of the leading therapeutic modalities for serving youth and their families. Alternative House recognized and implemented this model before it became a popular framework.

The goals of Alternative House include reuniting young people and their families, whenever possible and stabilizing the situation or behavior that brought the youth to the Emergency Shelter. Counselors conduct a thorough assessment of each adolescent’s situation, including extensive interviews with the teen and his or her guardian. This assessment is used by Alternative House’s family therapist and the youth’s primary counselor to develop an individual service plan for the young person. The plan is reviewed and updated regularly. The goals also include strengthening family relationships through education and counseling. Alternative House’s family therapist helps families develop their communication and conflict resolution skills. Through regular meetings with both the youth and the family, the family therapist promotes the development of strengths within the family and suggests tools to deal with issues that brought about the crisis.

Another goal is encouraging stable living conditions for youth. Alternative House staff help young people find permanent living arrangements after leaving the program. In many cases, adolescents return to their family after their stay at the Emergency Shelter. Staff work with the young person, his or her family, and other community service agencies to make certain any additional services or support the family might need is available. Some adolescents are placed in foster homes or long-term group homes. Emergency Shelter counselors make certain the young person has a safe, stable living arrangement on completion of the program. Residents are encouraged to keep in touch with the staff through the program’s hotline.

Finally, the goals include helping teenagers learn about and choose constructive courses of action. Through individual and group counseling, Alternative House staff help teens learn to make constructive choices about their lives. Alternative House’s Emergency Shelter for Teenagers program goals are accomplished by the use of an individualized service plan developed by the family therapist, the teen’s primary

counselor, and the teen. Each plan is tailored to address the unique needs of each young person.

At the heart of Alternative House's work with young people is the family therapy program. All young people receive an extensive evaluation from Alternative House's family therapist. The therapist looks at the teen's psychological and social development as well as any medical or developmental problems the young person may have. Individual and short-term family counseling are also provided by the family therapist. In addition, teens receive individual and group counseling sessions with Alternative House Counselors. Twice-daily group counseling sessions focus on educating and empowering youth to make better decisions. Individual sessions with the teen's primary counselor concentrate on specific issues important to the teenager. Through individual and group counseling, young people increase their knowledge of how their personal strengths and resources can help them in the crisis they face.

Recognizing that crisis intervention is short-term work, Alternative House maintains a wide network of community contacts. When young people or their families need additional services during the teen's stay or after leaving the program, appropriate referrals are made. Referrals are typically made to the local county referral system or to locally known therapists. These relationships not only benefit the community and family upon discharge from the shelter, they also help families find out about Alternative House. Alternative House maintains close working relationships with local police, schools, and churches. The program coordinator and the director of shelter services regularly speak at local churches and schools to teen youth groups, peer counselors and guidance counselors. In order to inform the community about the services they offer, Alternative House sends out approximately 4,000 brochures annually, both to private homes and to community organizations. An ad in the yellow pages and the on-site hot-line also help inform the community about the teen shelter. All in all, Alternative House has informal, long-standing relationships with over 100 organizations.

These relationships not only provide referrals and services for the teens at the shelter, they also assist in raising funds for the shelter's budget. Today, Alternative House still receives approximately one third of its funding from the Federal Runaway and

Homeless Youth Funding Grant. The Community Services Board contributes another third and the final third consists of private monetary donations. The networking discussed earlier is complimented by several fundraising ventures to comprise the private donations. Alternative House sponsors an annual 10K run and a charity auction to help raise donations. They publish a newsletter biannually, and as stated earlier, volunteer for at least one speaking engagement a week. A very low-tech direct mail solicitation occurs once a year, as well. Major contributors are local churches, Rotary clubs, other civic organizations and local businesses. Currently, Alternative House's annual budget rests at \$400,000. Eighty percent of the budget is allotted for staff salaries and the other 20% is for the mortgage and utilities. The remaining food, clothing, toiletries, and entertainment necessities are often met by donations. In order to meet fund raising and donation goals, staff are assisted by the Board of Directors.

The Board of Directors currently consists of 15 people, but can consist of anywhere from nine to 21 people, according to the by-laws. The members can serve a maximum of two consecutive terms of three years each. Members of the Board of Directors represent a wide range of individuals in the community. Currently, there are lawyers, a real-estate broker, a telecommunications consultant, a marketing consultant, an architect, and upper-level business managers on the board. Historically, they have had individuals from other types of careers, such as bankers and entrepreneurs. The board is currently evenly mixed in gender, but historically has consisted of more females than males.

The Board of Directors has three main functions. The first function is to raise funds for Alternative House and to represent the agency in the community. The board's second function is to oversee the fiscal operations of the agency. The third role of the board is a commitment to program policy. The board members have worked together to redraft the agency's mission statement and are routinely consulted on major program changes. The Board of Directors ensures that Alternative House is delivering the services envisioned in the mission statement and program philosophy. They have a commitment, not only to the agency, but to the youth and families who may one day need to access the services at the shelter. Although Alternative House's Emergency Shelter for Teenagers

is short-term and crisis oriented, it begins a process that provides young people and their families new opportunities. For many young people and their families, Alternative House represents hope -- hope that pressing issues can be resolved and that relationships can improve.

Alternative House Teen Shelter Daily Schedule

Monday – Thursday

8:00 am: Wake Up
9:00 am: Eat/Clean up
9:30 am: Earned Free Time
10:30 am: Education
12:30 pm: Lunch
1:00 pm: Quiet Time
2:00 pm: Recreation
3:00 pm: Earned Free Time
5:00 pm: News/Dinner Preparation
6:00 pm: Dinner/Chores
7:00 pm: Group
8:00 pm: In House Free Time
8:30 pm: Quiet Time
9:30 pm: Wrap-Up/Clean Up
10:00 pm: Bed Preparation
10:30 pm: Lights Out

Friday

8:00 am: Wake Up
9:00 am: Eat/Clean up
9:30 am: Earned Free Time
10:30 am: Education
12:30 pm: Lunch
1:00 pm: Quiet Time
2:00 pm: Recreation
3:00 pm: Earned Free Time
5:00 pm: News/Dinner Preparation
6:00 pm: Dinner/Chores
7:00 pm: Group
8:00 pm: In House Free Time
8:30 pm: Evening Activity
10:00 pm: Wrap-Up/Clean Up

10:30 pm: Bed Preparation
11:00 pm: Lights Out

Saturday and Sunday

8:30 am: Wake Up
9:30 am: Breakfast/Clean up
10:30 am: Earned Free Time
12:00 pm: Lunch
12:30 pm: Quiet Time
1:30 pm: Recreation
3:30 pm: Earned Free Time
5:30 pm: News/Dinner Preparation
6:30 pm: Dinner/Chores
7:30 pm: In House Free Time (7:00 pm on Sundays)
8:00 pm: Group (7:30 pm on Sundays)
9:30 pm: Quiet Time (9:00 pm on Sundays)
10:00 pm: Wrap-Up/Clean Up (9:30 on Sundays)
10:30 pm: Bed Preparation (10:00 on Sundays)
11:00 pm: Lights Out (10:30 on Sundays)