

Children at Heart launches program to benefit runaway, homeless youth

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STARRY, the counseling, foster care and emergency shelter arm of Children at Heart Ministries, has launched a new program to help runaway and homeless youth in Williamson County.

SAFE—Shelter Alternatives and Family Empowerment—will address the growing problem of homeless students. The county's five largest school districts estimate more than 1,000 students are homeless.

"There are currently no basic programs serving runaway and homeless youth in Williamson County," STARRY Executive Director Rhonda Dyer noted. "In addition, there are many students who are at risk of becoming runaways or homeless because of family issues. Their needs are not being met."

The SAFE program will address youths who already are homeless or runaways, and it will work to prevent young people from becoming separated from their families, she explained. It will increase shelter, counseling and case management services and home-based services for youth and their families.

Utilizing existing STARRY emergency shelter facilities, SAFE will increase the number of beds available for homeless youth. Counselors will provide crisis counseling, life skills training and referrals to resources for runaway and homeless youth and their families.

"SAFE not only will address the existing needs of teenagers who are

runaways or homeless, but will emphasize prevention and family needs by helping stabilize families so they are better equipped to provide a positive environment for their children,” Dyer added.

For runaway and homeless youth and those at risk, the emphasis will be on family reunification. The program will work with youth and families to return them to a safe, secure, loving home environment, whenever possible.

“SAFE is an important extension of our mission of helping build strong, healthy families,” said Jerry Bradley, president of Children at Heart Ministries, an agency of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

To help fund the program, STARRY has received a \$540,000, three-year grant from the U.S. Family & Youth Services Bureau.