

Homelessness Here at Home – Janesville and Local Communities –

A Focus on Children and Youth

“Theresa” is 17 years old. Her mother moved to another state two years ago, leaving her on her own. She lived with a boyfriend’s family but was recently kicked out and sleeps in her car. She wants to finish high school. Theresa is not her real name but she is a local Janesville teen and her story is real.

“The number of ‘couch surfing’ unaccompanied youth is startling,” says Sarah Williams, Homeless Intervention Task Force (HITF) Chair and director of Edgerton Community Outreach. “Each child has a different reason for not being able to go home. What would you do if your parents picked up and moved and left you behind? Would you go home to an abusive parent?”

Williams continues, “Some teens in our community find the strength within themselves to make it to school each day after sleeping in their car night after night. We as a community need to find a way to help these students succeed, and the first step in doing that is to create a safe place for them to go at night.”

The Homeless Education Action Team (HEAT) is a local task-force that focuses on the issue of homeless youth in Rock County. As a subcommittee of the HITF, HEAT’s mission is to provide a known safe and stable living environment for unaccompanied Rock County youth.

- HEAT is comprised of individuals from several Rock County agencies including the School Districts of Janesville and Beloit, Red Road House, United Way of North Rock County, House of Mercy, Lutheran Social Services, ECHO, Community Action, YWCA of Rock County, Rock County Human Services, Edgerton Community Outreach, Beloit Domestic Violence Center, and the University of Wisconsin – Rock County, as well as concerned citizens.

So far this year (11/5/08), 148 homeless students have been identified in the School District of Janesville. Ann Forbeck, School District of Janesville’s Homeless Education Coordinator, says, “For the first time this year, I’m seeing families losing homes they owned. In the past, I’ve usually seen these problems from families who have been renting.”

As Homeless Education Coordinator, Forbeck has one of a dozen such positions for school districts in Wisconsin. Six percent of districts in the nation have this type of a position.

Forbeck is in contact with other area school districts about this issue. She indicated that in the 2007/08 school year, there were:

- Approximately 20 homeless children combined from Edgerton, Evansville, Milton and Orfordville school districts.

Homeless youth include:

- Students not living with a parent or guardian
- “Couch surfers”
- Students sleeping in parks, abandoned buildings, cars or hotels



- Runaways
- Students living in shelters
- Students living in homes for teen mothers
- “Throwaway” youth who are kicked out by their parents

“In my experience, education is the way out of poverty and homelessness for our kids,” explains Forbeck. “We cannot leave these kids behind. As a community of people, we have to work together with the schools to address this issue.”

Here are more true stories of Janesville homeless youth:

- “Sarah” is an 11th grade student. Her mother died a few years ago and she is not welcome at home by her father and his new wife. She is a full time student and works two part time jobs. For the past two years she has been couch surfing.
- “Tim” is an 11th grade student. His mother has a severe mental illness and lives in very poor conditions. He alternates between living with her and couch surfing.
- “Jane” is 16 years old and is in recovery from substance abuse. She feels that she will relapse if she continues to live at home with her mother who is actively abusing substances. She is currently couch surfing.