

Bill targets homeless teens

Measure makes it easier to help kids living on the streets, advocate says

By Jon Murray

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A bill that would make it easier for homeless teens to get help from Indiana's few youth shelters could soon be headed to Gov. Mitch Daniels' desk for signing.

The bill would require the state to find out how many homeless people live in Indiana and eliminates a requirement that shelters and some other agencies obtain a parent's consent before helping people younger than 18.

"I'm hoping to see a reduction in the number of kids who are having to couch surf or are having to stay in unsafe places," said Cheryl Hall-Russell, chief executive officer of the Indiana Youth Services Association.

In place of parental consent, shelters would have 24 hours after a child's arrival to notify the state Department of Child Services. DCS would later inform a parent or guardian after checking for signs of abuse or neglect.

The bill, sponsored by state Rep. Dennis T. Avery, D-Evansville, and Sen. Vaneta Becker, R-Evansville, won approval from both chambers but has not yet been sent to the governor's office.

Daniels' spokeswoman said the governor would review the bill when it arrived.

"It's an important bill, one that a lot of people have worked several months on," Avery said. "We heard from a number of shelters that had to turn away kids."

Youth advocates said the bill could set up a foundation to expand services for homeless and runaway kids down the road.

For years, advocates have pressed for the General Assembly to address the issue of homeless and "unattached" youths, or those with no adults in their lives.

In Indiana, estimates of runaway and homeless youths vary from 10,000 to 30,000.

As in most states, shelters geared toward those groups rely on federal grants and local funds to operate, with no state money. Indiana has seven centers clustered in urban areas that receive federal money as emergency youth shelters.

The bill may not affect adult shelters -- including those operated by Wheeler Mission Ministries in Indianapolis -- which don't take in homeless people younger than 18 in part because of liability concerns.

Under the new law, the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority would undertake the homeless count. It also would expand its mission to include encouraging the formation of a regional homeless services system.

Avery's bill provides no money for the added work, but the authority's officials told the Legislative Services Agency they already have begun those efforts.

Avery and Hall-Russell said the better figures that would come from the count would shed light on the extent of the problem, providing hard data to back up future proposals.

House Bill 1165 has won approval from the Indiana House and Senate and should soon be sent to the governor.

Among its provisions:

Authority: Puts the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority in charge of working to improve services offered to the homeless and serve as an information clearinghouse.

Census: Requires the authority each year to study and estimate the number of Hoosiers who are homeless, including those younger than 18 or who are residents of other states but reside in Indiana.

Fewer restrictions: Allows emergency youth shelters to accept children without receiving parent or guardian approval. Removes a rule requiring them to notify parents within 24 hours of the child's arrival.

DCS role: Requires shelters to notify instead the state Department of Child Services within 24 hours. Charges DCS with investigating the child's situation by the second day and notifying the parent or guardian by the third day. If abuse or neglect is suspected, DCS cannot disclose the child's location to the parent.

Schools: Requires each district to appoint a liaison for homeless children and provide tutoring for homeless and foster children who need it. Allows some students in foster care to attend their