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2008 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Legislative proposals address Indiana's homeless youths

Lawmakers developing proposals to provide help, in a limited way

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Advocates see momentum building for the first time in years for the General Assembly to address the plight of Indiana's young and homeless.

The first charge, under proposals now taking shape: Find out how many teens are living on the streets.

"We know they exist, because they are showing up at our doors, and they're calling us," said Cheryl Hall-Russell, chief executive officer of the Indiana Youth Services Association.

But estimates of runaway and homeless youths in Indiana vary widely, from 10,000 to three times that many.

Proposals likely to be introduced in the 2008 legislative session, which begins in January, are expected to have a limited scope and a modest cost.

Hall-Russell and state Rep. Dennis T. Avery, D-Evansville, chairman of the study committee that drafted the proposals, said they are a crucial first step.

They would make the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority responsible for studying homelessness and encouraging more local shelters and services.

Most areas in the state lack such safe havens. The state provides no money for them.

"In my own community, Evansville, I didn't realize most homeless kids and runaways have nowhere to go," Avery said.

Of seven centers in Indiana that split \$900,000 a year in federal grant money, three are in Indianapolis.

Many homeless teens sleep in the shadows, Hall-Russell said. They don't want to be found for fear they will be sent to a foster home or treated as a delinquent, one of the few mechanisms Indiana has to deal with them.

Some are "unattached" -- having no adults in their lives -- and others are estranged from their parents or guardians. Older teens get caught in a gap, Hall-Russell said, since they also are difficult to place in foster care.

The association for years has lobbied for reform and for more state money, but the issue has been a low priority.

Avery is motivated by the work of his wife, Patty, who is on the Evansville-Vanderburgh County Homeless Youth Council.

The issue's importance washes across party lines, he said, and he's hopeful the proposals will pass in the Senate. The committee's vice chairwoman was Sen. Vaneta Becker, R-Evansville.

Two of the proposals would loosen restrictions that sometimes tie the shelters' hands.

Indiana law requires shelters to obtain consent from a parent or guardian before they help children younger than 18, Hall-Russell said. One proposal would remove that restriction for teens 16 or older.

Another proposal relaxes a rule requiring a shelter to notify parents of a runaway's location within 24 hours of the youth's arrival. The shelter would have three days, Hall-Russell said, allowing its staff to probe for possible abuse or other threatening conditions.

Advocates say Indiana trails other Midwestern states.

Wisconsin provides some money for shelters and programs. Illinois allows homeless teens to be partly emancipated if reunification with their families is not possible. A couple of states already have undertaken comprehensive studies of the issue within their borders.

But most still rely on locally based nonprofit agencies to operate the shelters, focusing instead on strategy.

Avery sees more steps on Indiana's horizon. He would like to see the state further expand Project Safe Place, a program that encourages businesses and community buildings to post markers signaling to abused and troubled children that they can learn where to get help.

Avery said his main concern is making sure teens in need of immediate help in both rural and urban areas can find an emergency shelter.