

Find safe alternatives for vulnerable 'throwaways' **By Cheryl Hall-Russell**

We see them, but we don't really see them. Hanging out under a bridge in Broad Ripple, sleeping in parks, or "couch surfing" somewhere different every night, homeless youth are kids who can't quite seem to get it together. They have fallen out with their parents one too many times or have fled abusive situations.

Often, we don't see them, but clearly we need to.

For the past several months, state Rep. Dennis Avery, D-Evansville, has chaired an interim study committee on missing and homeless youth in Indiana. Committee members are bringing focus to the problems faced by homeless and unattached youth in the state. They are considering legislation to get these youth moving in the right direction.

The National Runaway Switchboard reports that, nationally, there are 1.7 million runaway youth on the streets every day. Gavin Mariano, who testified for the study committee, knows their plight well. By the time he was 17 he had run away almost a dozen times. Affected by the trauma of living in a violent household, he finally ran to a public library that had a bright yellow Safe Place sign. Staff members referred him to the Crisis Center Alternative House in Gary.

Mariano is one of the lucky ones. Now a graduate of Indiana University, he works at the Crisis Center as a counselor. The kids he helps are called unaccompanied youth, homeless or even throwaways. Most don't have access to services; some fear returning or cannot return home. Too many become victims of sexual abuse or use "survival sex" to help them meet basic needs. Drugs use is common, as is poor physical health.

"Runaway and unattached youth are the most vulnerable of our state's youth," explains Bonnie Strycker, executive director of the Youth Service Bureau of St. Joseph County. "They are most likely to experience long-term dependence on or involvement with public health, social services, emergency assistance and, unfortunately, the criminal justice system."

The Indiana Youth Service Association's 34 youth service bureaus are often called on to aid these youth. The organizations offer programs that combat delinquency and offer services to teens in crisis. Association members are particularly concerned about a subgroup of youth who are not only homeless, they are unattached from families. These are 16- to 21-year-olds who, for a variety of reasons, no longer have adults in their lives on which they can depend.

Some teens have been kicked out of their homes. Others have become pregnant, experimented with drugs or have dropped out of school. Having lived on their own for a while, they fear encounters with law enforcement or the idea of going into a group home.

This population is not only separated from the care of families, current laws make it difficult for them to receive most types of supportive services. Those under 18 are not allowed to enter shelters without parental consent. They can't receive medical attention or an education, and there are too few emergency shelters around the state that can legally address their needs.

The number of homeless youth in the state is difficult to assess. The number of unattached youth is even more difficult because these youth tend to avoid formal systems, fearing being remanded as runaways. Part of the new legislation being considered would help us better track their numbers and find ways to get them into safe alternatives.

As a state, we cannot tolerate any of our youth to be "throwaways." We can continue to look past them, or find ways to provide a bridge to a healthier future. Legislators should be commended for addressing this critical issue.