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SHIFT TOWARD HOME

Children's Village moves to place troubled kids in families



Photos by Stephen Schmitt/The Journal News

Barbara Robinson playfully taps her son, Thomas Monk, on his jaw after she watched his boxing practice. Monk is one of many former residents of Children's Village who now live in family homes. A Children's Village counselor still meets and speaks with Monk regularly to help him plan his future and manage stress.

New leader says youths fare better outside institutions

Shawn Cohen
The Journal News

DOBBS FERRY — Alex S. said he felt as if he were in prison when he was at Children's Village. Now, the 17-year-old is with a foster mother who is specially trained to deal with his attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. On a recent rainy afternoon, he cuddled with her on the couch and called her "Mom."

Thomas Monk, also 17, said he had to fend off bullies who picked on his little brother when he was at the Dobbs Ferry institution. Now, he is back with his mother in the Bronx, still supervised by a child-care counselor, and channels his aggression in the boxing ring.

Anthony, 17, is still at Children's Village, but he was beaming hours after meeting with his

future foster mother. He is getting ready to move out through a new program that is preparing her to deal with his behavior problems.

"It was like heaven. I made myself at home. I respected her rules," said Anthony, sitting on his bunk. "This place ain't for me. It's phony here, like a shield that's just blocking the outside world."

These cases represent a new trend in child welfare, which Children's Village now is fully embracing. After years of defending the institutionalization of troubled children, the Dobbs Ferry agency is developing and expanding programs that match children with families and help them succeed.

The turnaround comes as New York City's Administration for Children's Services, the largest placement agency, is launching an effort to phase out institutions and group homes and to allow more money — and services — to follow the children to their communities.

"I really believe that, with services, a large number of our kids can go back into the community," said Jeremy Kohomban, who was hired last year as president and chief executive officer of Children's Village. "It's incumbent upon us to create a family context for them, because it's only in a family that they learn to be your neighbor and mine, that they learn to be a brother or a father one day. We can't teach them those skills here with any effectiveness."

Nan Dale, his predecessor, who worked there for 23 years, was one of the nation's staunchest defenders of institutional care, saying many of these youngsters didn't have viable homes and couldn't be managed on the outside. Her goal, as head of one of the largest residential treatment centers in the country, was to treat the children and prepare them for a return to society, but many residents would spend years at the institution at high

Please see CHILDREN, 8A

BY THE NUMBERS

1,662

The number of New York City children in residential treatment centers as of Feb. 25.

1,975

Number of New York children in RTCs on Feb. 25, 2000.

ON THE WEB

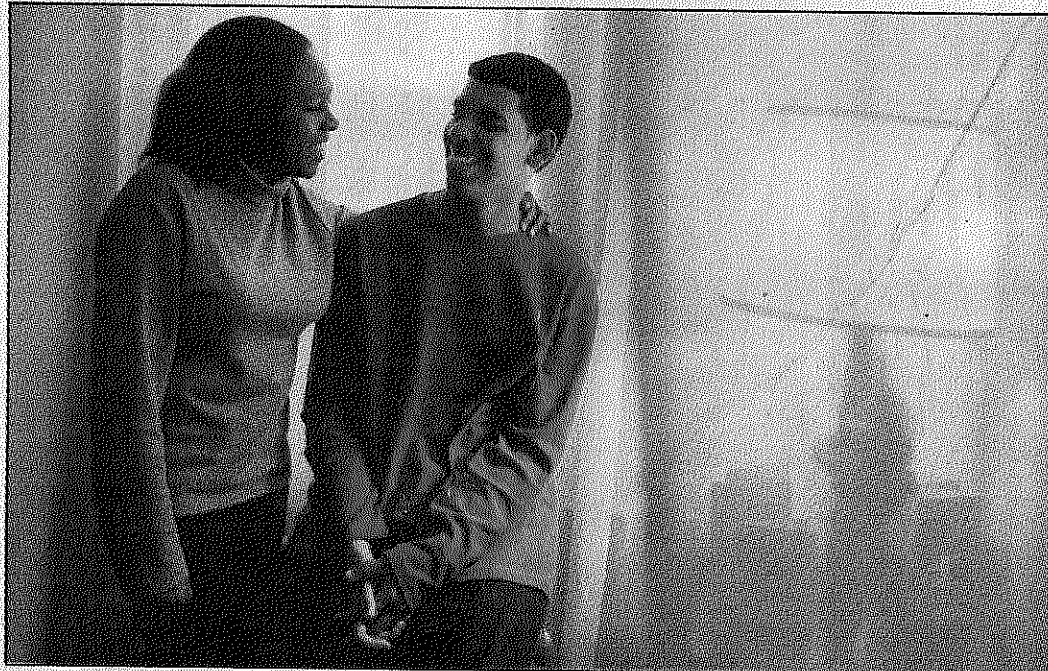
 Read our original series on RTCs and view a photo gallery at thejournalnews.com/fostercare

As part of a Children's Village program, Alex S. has moved to foster mom Pauline Allen's home in the Bronx. He is improving in school and looks forward to college.

INSIDE

Joy, challenges after returning home, 8A

Dobbs Ferry residents complain of teens from children's centers making trouble, 1B



keep them out of institutions.

"I don't disagree with the fact that, if you provide very strong, well-developed community supports, that some kids can be served in the community, but the 'if' has never existed," said Dale, who left Children's Village two years ago.

Financial hit

Children's Village and other residential treatment centers in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties, which house hundreds of New York City boys and girls, already are taking a financial hit from the declining number of institutionalized children. Institutions can receive more than \$70,000 per year in tax dollars for a single child's care, excluding school costs, and fewer referrals means less money.

Children's Village, which can house up to 319 children on the sprawling suburban campus, now has about 65 empty beds and has shut two of its dormitories and laid off scores of employees.

The financial pressure essentially has caused agencies to compete for child referrals, which they do by distinguishing themselves in the New York City foster rating system. St. Christopher's Inc., which runs another RTC in Dobbs Ferry, recently was accused of trying to cheat on its quality review by falsifying records in its boarding home program. This prompted New York to withdraw more than 700 children from the agency, leading St. Christopher's to lay off at least 150 employees. The city also announced cuts to several other agencies and noted that more will be targeted this year as part of its reforms.

"The handwriting is on the wall for places like Children's Village in light of what ACS is trying to do now," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, "and residential treatment centers may need to adapt or die."

Kohomban foresees a day when these institutions are used primarily for short-term emergency care. He says his agency can play a greater role in serving the youngsters after they get discharged.



Children's Village residents Elijah, 15, left, and Evan, 13, sit in the bedroom they share with two other youngsters in their cottage on the Dobbs Ferry campus.

"The efficacy of our work has to be measured in what happens after the kids leave us," he said. "That's what's exciting about the commissioner's plan. It demands us to front-load, meaning the moment a kid comes here, we'll have to get a team in there to identify the reason for the placement. Our job is to address those needs as quickly as we can and get them back into the community. It will radically alter the way we have traditionally done business."

Children's Village is taking steps to fit into the new system. It is expanding its "Multi-Systemic Therapy" program, which provides services such as counseling and drug treatment to 88 families in New York City, Westchester and Rockland.

In October, it launched a pilot program called "You Gotta Believe," which is working to find homes for about 22 of its older residents by matching them with foster and adoptive parents who will receive special training.

"The goal is to get them out of here and back into the community," said program director Tonyina McGhee. "This way, they can have

a caring adult in their lives to help them transition to adulthood so they're not doing it by themselves."

Anthony, a Queens native who has been at Children's Village for three years, would be the first to leave, and he can't wait. Like many other residents, he has had a tough life: His mother surrendered him to foster care at a time when he was stealing and fighting and his father was in prison. His mother died two years ago, so the agency has reached out beyond his family to find him a home.

He recently visited his prospective foster mother in Queens.

"She just talked to me about life and college and drinking and smoking," he said. "I was nervous at first, but I got over it. It's time to stop being nervous and get on with my life."

'Big brother I never had'

Children's Village also is expanding its therapeutic foster boarding home program, in which children live with specially trained foster parents. The city says it will rely more on these types of homes to help children return to family settings.

For Alex, the Children's Village

program means he can live with a loving parent and attend public school with friends. Both he and his foster mother are seen regularly by a social worker and therapist, who guide him on life as they hone her parenting skills. His situation isn't perfect; Alex doesn't socialize much. He spends countless hours in front of the television and playing video games, and takes two medications to control his depression and hyperactivity. But he doesn't harm others, he is improving in school, and he looks forward to college.

"A lot of times, Alex and I have problems," said his foster mother, Pauline Allen. "We need someone sometimes from the outside to come in, and we work together as a team to deal with things."

Children's Village also is continuing a program that assigns child-care workers to help older children stay in school, find jobs and keep out of trouble after they leave. The mostly privately funded Work Appreciation for Youth program serves 137 children and follows them for five years.

Thomas Monk now considers his WAY counselor, Arnell Jack-

On the Web

Previous coverage: www.thejournalnews.com/rtc

New York City

Administration for Children's Services:

www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/acs

Children's Village:

www.childrensvillage.org

Wraparound Milwaukee:

www.milwaukeecounty.org/Service/organizationDetail.asp?org=6450&audience=5

ingly, says he wants to introduce a "wraparound" system of care in which children and their families receive services such as in-home therapy and mentors.

The wraparound system was pioneered in Milwaukee and cut the number of children in residential treatment centers by 90 percent, dramatically shortening their stays and safely reuniting hundreds of families. A national trend followed.

The program, which was featured in *The Journal News* in a 2002 series about RTCs, basically is a managed-care system that pools money from the child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health and Medicaid systems. A team is assigned to get each child and his or her family the support they need, whether that be therapy, day care, mentors or even home health aides.

Mattingly has yet to spell out specifics of how a similar system would work here. He talks about a need to change the way foster care gets funded and eliminate per diem financing, which provides centers a fixed daily rate for each child in care based on how much they spent two years earlier.

"The per diem system creates a sort of perverse incentive for agencies to keep children in their care," said ACS spokeswoman Lisi de Bourbon. "That's what we're trying to put an end to."

Kohomban says he supports wraparound and the notion that most children can be successfully returned home. In his 11 months at Children's Village, he has begun preparing the groundwork so his agency can play a major role in this effort. Some at Children's Village are resisting the changes and, he suspects, a few have quit over this.

"It's to be expected, especially in our line of work, because many people have built their careers around one way of thinking," Kohomban said.

"We're not there yet, but we will one day be as aggressive as any Wraparound Milwaukee model you've ever seen. We're just ramping up right now."

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son, a trusted friend and mentor who advises him on everything from career plans to managing stress. They meet in the Bronx two or three times a month and speak on the phone whenever Monk needs someone to talk to.

"He's like the big brother I never had," Monk said.

But these programs go only so far. Monk's brother, Arik, who spent six years with him at Children's Village, doesn't receive the service because he was too young to be eligible when he left.

"I'm glad I'm out here because I'm on my own," said Arik, 15. "But it's a lot harder. I have to take care of myself because, if I don't, nobody's going to help me."

Their mother, a recovering drug addict and asthmatic who once was homeless because she couldn't afford rent, frets that her entire family needs assistance and said she wouldn't have lost the children in the first place if help had been available.

"I could have done a lot better with a little more help," Barbara Robinson said.

'Wraparound' model

The city Administration for Children's Services introduced plans last month to increase its spending on these family-based services, in hopes of keeping families together and sending more children home.

The commissioner, John Mat-