

St. Luke's LifeWorks Celebrates Opening of New Youth Center



STAMFORD -- For children, the stress of homelessness can inflict long-term emotional and academic tolls if efforts to boost self-esteem are not thorough enough, Jason T. Shaplen told a crowd that filled a newly opened activity room for teenagers Monday.

"The most effective way to break the cycle of homelessness is through the children," said Shaplen, chief executive officer of St. Luke's Lifeworks.

Shaplen, along with Mayor Michael Pavia and U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., spoke Monday at the opening celebration for a new youth center on the second floor of Lifeworks' family shelter at 141 Franklin St.

The facility, which consists of both a short-term family shelter and longer term transitional housing, provides a home to about 500 displaced adults and children a year.

On average, more than 200 people sleep there each night, according to Fiona K. Hodgson, chief development officer for Lifeworks.

After-school programs for children ages 6 to 18 will help them stay focused during the ordeal of being homeless, Himes said.

"I know the importance of relationships and having an alternative to being out on the street fooling around and seeing a path forward," he said.

"...I think we're going to see results immediately."

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Shaplen said costs for the new center were limited to about \$50,000 for material, about a third of the original estimated price, thanks to the labor of Lifeworks' five-member maintenance crew, who donated their spare time to build the center.

"It will be a safe place to discuss problems and stresses due to being in a shelter," Shaplen said. "It will provide a positive outlet and escape the cycle of poverty that we all know too well."

Mirlande Pressat, director of programs for the youth center, said the new facilities were in line with the type of child-friendly facility she has hoped for to conduct after-school programs.

A group of elementary school children at the shelter Monday took part in activities in a dedicated room with royal blue walls decorated with stars and other shapes.

After listening to a story, the children got a chance to improve their scientific skills by playing a game using marshmallows and licorice to represent different parts of the structure of DNA.

"I've always wanted a space for the children to have for their own rather than sharing space with other groups," Pressat said. "I think these rooms will feel like their place."

Money to help build the center came from the Vince and Linda McMahon Foundation, Purdue Pharma, and St. Barnabas Episcopal Church.

Linda McMahon, a Greenwich resident and former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment, said she decided to donate to the new center after visiting Lifeworks and being impressed with Shaplen's description of programs for youth.

"I was impressed by his vision," McMahon said. "I wanted to be able to help in some way and I think in terms of the youth program, the result speaks for itself."

Families that stay at the shelter fall into two categories, Hodgson said -- those who stay for two months or fewer, or those who require longer-term shelter of up to two years.

Pavia said Lifeworks' support network over the years has saved the city and state millions in dollars to provide services by curbing homelessness by offering a well-timed hand to families to keep them from destitution.

"What does this program mean to the state and the city of Stamford?" Pavia asked. "...It means children who are not getting the base foundation they need to hit the ground running and have a leg up get it here."