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School For Troubled Teens Faces Closure

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Clarksville's Genesis Learning Center May Close Due To Funding Shortage

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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. -- State budget cuts are taking a serious toll on programs for Montgomery County's troubled teenagers and the adults who help them.



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The county is losing two grants, 10 jobs and a school for needy teens. For years, teachers at the Genesis Learning Center have been helping teens.

Budget cuts have already forced the director of the school to layoff two workers, and now it looks as though the school will have to close its doors for good.

"We can't let these doors close; we can't," said mother Tina Gunnels.

Gunnels' son, Manuel, was expelled from Northeast Middle School after possessing drugs, but he later went to the Genesis Learning Center and eventually graduated an Honor Roll student.

Gunnels said it was the proudest day of her life. She calls it a day that she said would not be possible without Genesis Learning Center.

"If you take these students out of this school and close this school, we're going to have more crime. We're going to have more violence. It's the only outlet for the students," said Gunnels.

For the last 15 years, the center operated off of a \$422,000 grant. But because of state budget cuts, that grant, the center and its eight employees are all going away.

"We have something to try and rehabilitate them. If that goes away, I don't know what else we've got to keep them off the streets, other than private school. A lot of parents can't afford that," said Montgomery County Court Administrator Larry Ross.

The Learning Center isn't the only place where troubled teens are being affected. The county's juvenile probation program is losing a \$70,000 grant. This means a juvenile probation officer and a court clerk will likely wind up jobless.

"A lot of these kids who come through the court system aren't bad kids; they just make dumb mistakes, and we can give them a court class, do some mentoring with them and then send them to counseling. Some of these kids will turn around," said Ross.

Ross is begging the county to foot the bills for both programs, but he said the outlook isn't good. Instead, jobs will be lost, doors will close and kids like Manuel will have few places to turn but the streets.

"Funding has to come from somewhere. We can pay for unnecessary things in our community; we can pay for this school," said Gunnels.

Juvenile programs in Montgomery County aren't the only ones being affected by the lack of funding. Rutherford County's teen learning center is facing budget cuts as well. Both centers plan to close their doors in June.

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