



Staten Island Advance

Covenant House folding its operation here

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By PHIL HELSEL

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Covenant House thrived from humble beginnings and later rose from the ashes of scandal, but it's no match for the putrid economy.

The charity that specifically serves at-risk youth and had been scouting new quarters after it was priced out of its longtime home at 70 Bay St. in St. George, has elected to abandon the borough altogether amid a decrease in donations and worries about future revenue, a spokesman confirmed yesterday.

"It's a hard time for everybody," said Tom Manning. "We had a decent Christmas but we have to prepare for the drop-off after that."

The charity's core service, providing emergency shelter at its Manhattan crisis center and transitional housing, is not expected to change but the pullback could affect outreach and prevention efforts and occurs as all forms of homelessness are on the rise.

Krystal Olsson, a 21-year-old from New Brighton, got her GED from the Covenant House Staten Island location. It wasn't a shelter, but often staff would help troubled teens get to Manhattan by giving them MetroCards, or just giving advice.

"A lot of kids really need them, and now if you're homeless or in trouble, you can't just go to the Covenant House in your own borough," said Ms. Olsson, who is studying to be a medical assistant. "If you're homeless, how are you supposed to get there [Manhattan]?"

Though Staten Island youth account for a small percentage of the number of homeless and runaways who end up at the crisis center, that number has been on the rise. In the fiscal year that ended in 2006, 53 of the approximately 2,900 young people sheltered there for the first time were from the borough. In 2007, that number grew to 92.

The incidence of homelessness among young people from all boroughs was reported over the summer to have reached record levels.

Advocates like City Councilman Lewis Fidler (D-Brooklyn), who chairs the Council's youth services committee, called the closing of Covenant House regional offices "disturbing." He has called a meeting Feb. 12 with the city's homeless and at-risk youth workers to assess the impact of the economy on operations.

"I'm afraid we're going to hear that some of them are closing, not their shelter bed services, but some of the ancillary services that go along with them," Fidler said.

Manning didn't know how much the private donations that make up 75 percent of Covenant House's budget have decreased since the recession began, but he forecast a drop of \$2 million to \$3 million from 2007 and 2008 donations.

Corporate donations also have dried up, he said.

Even though Islanders will have to travel farther for services, Manning said the organization will try to conduct more outreach to make up for it.

"The idea of being out in the boroughs was to help these high-risk folks before they become Covenant kids," Manning said. "But we will make sure these kids don't fall through the cracks."

Covenant House had its start in the 1960s, when the Rev. Bruce Ritter took runaways into his Manhattan home. The Franciscan priest's poignant direct-mail appeals were enormously effective, but the charity was tarnished when he was forced out amid allegations he'd engaged in sexual relationships with some of the youths.

New leadership restored the operation.

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