

Help for teens

Pathfinder's 21-day program guides youths through difficult times

by Lynn Woike
Editor

When Precious was depressed, running away from home, stealing cell phones to feed a social media addiction and getting bullied at school, she began cutting herself and thinking that she'd like to die. Meanwhile, her mother was at her wits' end, having tried other social services and programs with no success. She was ready to give up.

"I was in a really bad, toxic relationship where I was very unstable," Precious said. After staying away for three days, she returned home, but didn't stay. "I had to go to the hospital because I was trying to hurt myself. My mom just wanted me to get better."

Although she wanted to go home, Precious said her only choice was one of two programs. Picking Pathfinders was the first of many good decisions she made as she turned her life around her freshman year in high school. A senior this year, she's getting straight As, has a good rapport with her mother and limits her use of social media to only her two best friends.

Hers is one of the many success stories from the 21-day Pathfinders program administered by The Bridge Family Center. Federal funding provides emergency shelter for five youths ages 11-17

who are in crisis or at risk, and who are not being served by the Department of Children and Families. Three beds for girls are in West Hartford and two for boys are in a Manchester facility. The Bridge also has 40 additional beds in six congregate care programs licensed by the Department of Children and Families.

Pathfinder's initial three-year grant served 21 youth (20 girls and one boy), said Mike Rulnick, director of residential services at The Bridge.

"Typically, these kids are referred by their parents, by their schools, or sometimes the kid themselves will call us. We have 24-hour access because our emergency shelter program has 24/7 staffing so you get a response immediately," he said.

When a child is struggling in their home and his or her parents don't know what else to do except call DCF, this program can help.

"If you're a parent struggling with a child who is using substances, having school truancy, hanging out with the wrong crowd, just basically not obeying any rules of the home, that's

absolutely a situation where we can help. If you're a homeless youths sleeping on the streets, that's a situation where we can help," Rulnick said.

"During that 21 days, we would work with the child and the parent for family reunification so that reunification can occur successfully. While they are with us they get individual therapy and family therapy, and 90 percent of the kids have gone back home successfully."

"These kids are at risk of becoming homeless and really what they need is respite and support and counseling to keep the family intact. So, we basically work with the family to put some measures in place that will help with communication and success when the child returns home."

"We like to refer to it as a break, you got a break from each other, regroup, come together with therapy," said Mareta Arena, the

Mareta Arena, the clinical coordinator, and a marriage and family therapist at The Bridge, can't think of one girl with whom she didn't instantly bond.

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Many situations bring them to the program, she said, "including domestic minor sex trafficking, substance abuse, legal issues." Yet, despite any labels the girls come in with, Arena couldn't think of one girl with whom she didn't instantly bond.

"At the end of the day they are still teenagers," she said. "They all go home ... and I follow up with them afterwards."

A couple have returned for another dose of help.

Calling the 21 days a "crash course," she said, "You can't squash the root of the problem. That's why we try to help them out with services and get them into places where they can succeed and work on the things they need to work on after this."

"We're not always full. Referrals are not coming in as much as we thought they would at this point," Rulnick said.

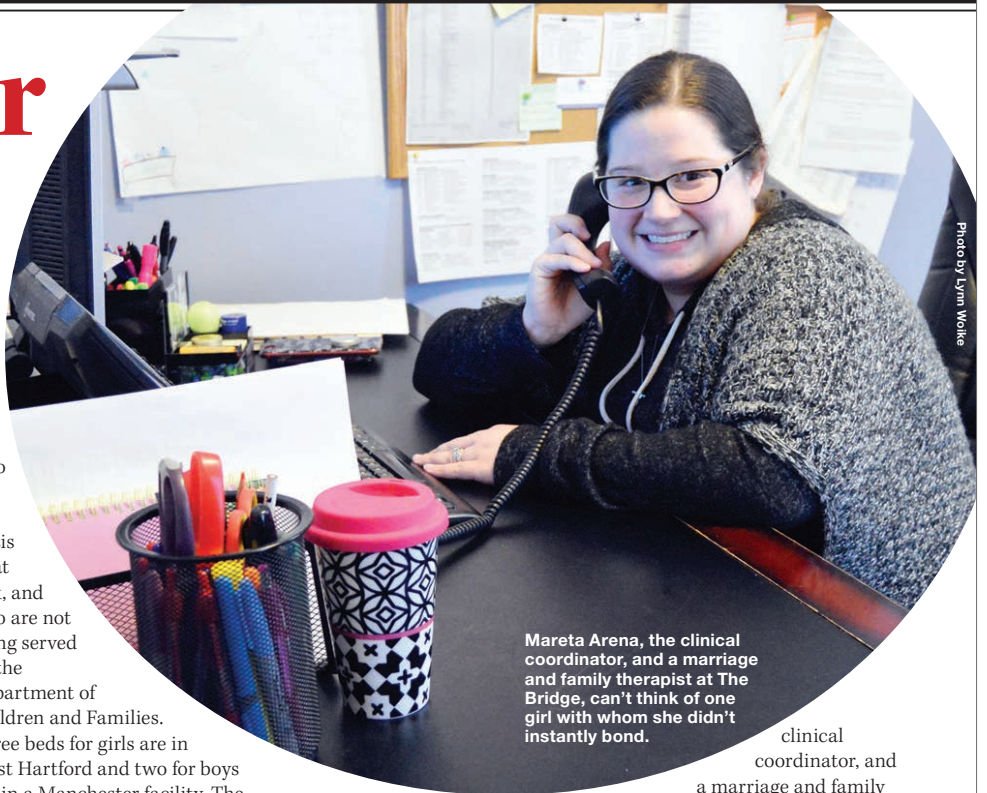


Photo by Lynn Woike

The Bridge has reached out to school social workers and liaisons and through community forums, yet, he said, "We've never filled all five at once."

The program runs at no cost to the client and provides everything from therapy to transportation. Parental permission and participation are required.

"We make this as homelike as possible," Arena said. "We eat dinner together. They all do chores. They get an allowance for their chores even. They get to go on activities together. We work around their schedules," Arena said.

"It helped a lot that I was getting rewarded for doing good things. I felt accomplished. I felt good about it," Precious said.

She used the money she

earned from doing chores to buy clothes for school. It helped her realize what she could achieve. She started believing in herself and her power to make changes.

She got to go home for her birthday.

"If I never would have come here, I would have ended up being in foster care or a shelter because my mom, she had enough of it and she felt like giving up," Precious said.

"I saw a spiral, I saw me just acting out. ... I really wasn't thinking right. I was just very emotional, depressed ... [and] scared because nobody liked me. I was just getting tormented by people."



Photo by Lynn Wolke

House meetings and other activities are held in this room.

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Girls eat
together in
the kitchen.

Feeling worthless, she said she didn't know what to do, and had thought of ending her life to stop thinking about it.

"It was a lot of me blaming myself and feeling like I ruined everything. I ruined my relationship with my family," Precious said.

"When I got here, I felt like this was my time to change," she said.

While there were "lots of rules," there were also "not as many distractions." There were consequences, but there were also rewards.

Meeting the other girls in the house made her realize "people go through the same things that I go through. ... Being here, I felt like I could breathe. Like I can actually be happy and not have to worry about everybody judging me for how I am, who I am," she said.

Her focus became proving to her mother that she could change so her mother wouldn't give up on her.

"I used to fight a lot. I learned to control my anger. ... I had to learn my lesson,"

Precious said. "I had to remove myself from toxic people and relationships because I didn't want to go through that again. I don't want to go back, I want to move forward. ...

"This place can actually change you. It's hard at first, but it's worth it because being in here I was scared, I was lonely, I was depressed, I was going through a lot of mixed emotions. But being here ... gives you a lot of time to think. You realize the situation you're in can actually get better," she said.

"From me being in here I had to learn to maintain for myself, so I went and I got a job, my first summer job. That taught me how to maintain my money and I was buying my school clothes and I was buying everything I needed. I bought my own self a phone for the first time. I felt just happy and accomplished. I don't like nobody to pay for stuff for me because I like to do it on my own. I feel accomplished just doing that."

While she doesn't like her

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-Mareta Arena

current job, she said, "I'm not going to quit. I know what it feels like to be broke."

She's looking forward to going away to college next year and working with children on the autism spectrum when she graduates.

Her story could have had a very different ending. To keep youths from becoming homeless is the reason The Bridge wrote the grant.

"Homelessness among youth is very under reported because there are a lot of children couch surfing and they don't consider themselves homeless ... but they really are. They don't have a permanent situation. It's also very hard to get an accurate survey of homelessness," he said, in part because of varying methods of defining homelessness.

"Whatever the stats are, I think they are under reported."

Calling the Pathfinder

program "a very necessary community service," he said, "there are definitely children and families who'd benefit from it. We'd like to be doing even more of what we're doing."

To those who may hesitate to seek the help being offered, Precious said, "It's scary at first, and to open up about being bullied and just explaining my experience. It's not going to be easy for them to just step forward with it, but just that they're not alone and that you could actually change and you could actually get better for yourself, and there actually are people out there who are good resources, and you just need enough help, and family should be there for you no matter what.

"I'm glad I got the help that I needed. I got my therapy now and that's like the best thing that happened. I feel great every time I have a session." **WHL**

Girls have private bedrooms.

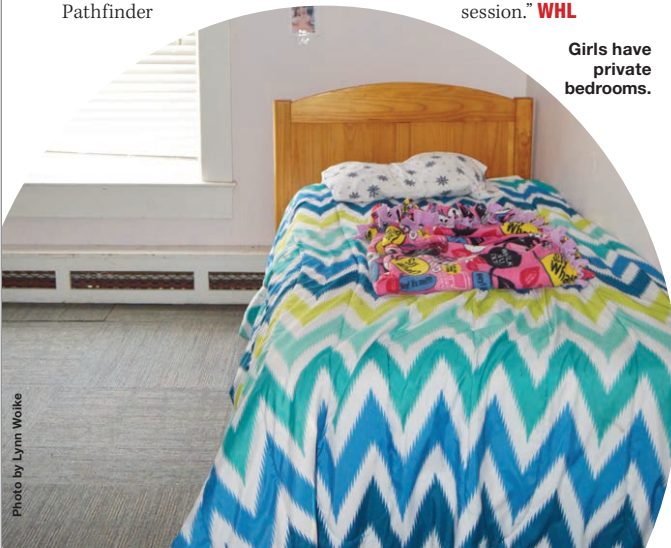


Photo by Lynn Wolke

Ask the Car Pro...

IS IT SAFE TO DRIVE WITH MY 'CHECK ENGINE' LIGHT ON?

When your car's 'CHECK ENGINE' light illuminates on your dashboard, you have little idea about what the light is telling you or how you should react. This always creates some uneasy feeling to most car owners who have no knowledge on how a vehicle system works.

The Check Engine light is a signal from your on-board computer displaying that something is not operating properly on your vehicle. This light can mean many different things from a minor problem such as poor fuel economy and polluting the atmosphere to a serious issue that could end up damaging your engine or transmission components.

There are a few things to check: First look to see if the light on your dashboard is steady or flashing.

If the light is steady, this may not be an emergency. Check all your gauges on your dashboard to see that they are in working order and at normal conditions. Such as oil pressure, water temperature, battery, gas cap tight, etc.

If the vehicle appears to be running normal, then you may have some time to fix the issue, but don't delay as there is no way of knowing for sure. Schedule an appointment to a licensed professional

repair shop to determine the cause of the light.

If there are any gauges on your dashboard that indicate low oil pressure, engine overheating, battery voltage low, these conditions mean you should pull over as soon as you can to a safe place and shut off your vehicle.

If the Check Engine light is flashing, this can cause serious damage to your engine or transmission if you continue to drive. Pay attention to how the car is running. If the engine feels or sounds different, or loss of power, reduce the speed of the vehicle immediately and pull over to a safe spot and shut the vehicle off. In this case have your vehicle towed to a repair shop and have it checked out as soon as possible to prevent expensive damage.

One final note: Don't confuse the Check Engine light with the Maintenance Reminder light or the Service Interval light. These lights illuminate when a routine service is due. They are usually triggered by mileage or some other type vehicle use measurement.

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