

Covenant House seeks to expand mental health services

Covenant House New York, which provides shelter and support to 250 young people in the city each day, is seeking to expand its mental health services.

The nonprofit operates a homeless shelter and federally qualified health center at the corner of West 41st Street and 10th Avenue.

During the past several years, it has grown its mental health services team to about a dozen social workers and clinicians in Manhattan and the Bronx. It would like to build out the team further, including at its Midtown health center.

Covenant House has filed a certificate-of-need application with the state to certify mental health services as a medical specialty there.

"The need for readily accessible forms of health care for the homeless has been greatly exacerbated by the unprecedented increase in the number of homeless adults and children in New York City over the past several years," Covenant House wrote in its filing.

The nonprofit cited an estimate by the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services that, on any given night, there are some 3,800 homeless teenagers in the city.

Many of those young people identify as LGBTQ. And homelessness in youth has been correlated with drug use, previous incarceration, risky sexual practices, prostitution or victimization, and mental illness.

"Provision of mental health services is essential," Covenant House wrote, "for meeting the complex and multifaceted needs of homeless youth."

Dr. Andrew Pearson, a child psychiatrist and director of Covenant House's mental health department, echoed that sentiment.

Covenant House encounters young people who are psychotic, schizophrenic or bipolar, Pearson said. It also sees many young people who have been traumatized and are experiencing suicidal thoughts.

A recent survey, Pearson said, found that homeless teenagers were twice as likely to commit suicide as young people who were housed. And suicide attempts among homeless teenagers were more likely to result in death.

"We can use as much mental health support as possible," Pearson said.

Ultimately, Covenant House would like to build out its mental health staff should the appropriate funding be available.

"One of the things that we're really trying to prevent for these young people is becoming homeless" in the long term, said Samantha Alvarez Benowitz, a licensed clinical social worker and clinical administrator at Covenant House.

It's important to help the teens not only find housing but also address any serious mental health issues, Benowitz said.