

COMMENT

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St. Jude's Ranch for Children a safe haven for teen mothers



MONA SHIELD PAYNE/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Eleven-month-old Parker Colesar christens the St. Richards Inn as she crawls on the new carpet Saturday during the grand opening of the group-home cottage for pregnant and parenting teens at St. Jude's Ranch for Children.

By Jean Reid Norman
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Among the cases of teen prostitutes Clark County Juvenile Judge William Voy sees on Wednesday mornings during his special court for sexually exploited children, there is often a pregnant girl or two.

Until Saturday, with the opening of the Pregnant and Parenting Teen Program at St. Jude's Ranch for Children in Boulder City, he didn't have any place in Clark County to place them.

A building that had housed seasonal volunteers and guests at the ranch was renovated into a new cottage at the facility for abused and neglected children. Now 10 teenage mothers ages 10 to 17 will live in the rooms with their babies, attending school, learning life skills and becoming responsible parents under the watchful eyes of three trained staff members.

The new program was sorely needed, Voy said. Most places aren't equipped to take pregnant girls, their own homes are nonexistent or dysfunctional, and the girls are apt to run away from foster homes, he said. The closest program that could handle the girls was in rural Douglas County.

"These kids need to be here where they can work with them," said Voy, who added that Boulder City is far enough from Las Vegas so the girls are less likely to be drawn back into their old lifestyles but close enough so that they can get support from local family and friends.

"They have a place where they have 24/7 supervision and the incentive of having the baby with them," he said.

It's far better than the Clark County Juvenile Detention Center, where many teen girls have ended up simply because it offers medical care and three meals a day, St. Jude's Ranch chief Executive Officer Christine Spadafor said.

The program for pregnant teens takes St. Jude's strength – taking care of abused and neglected children and helping them heal – matches it to a crying community need, Spadafor said.

The goal will be to turn the girls into good parents, and a key way to do that will be to ensure the young mothers "are 100 percent responsible for their babies 100 percent of the time," Spadafor said.

The staff members will provide structure, advice and role models, but not babysitting, said Nicole Dionisio, one of the three full-time staff members who will work with the young mothers.

St. Jude's is renovating another building that is currently used for play therapy to house a Head Start program to provide the babysitting.

"If they are 100 percent responsible for the children, it's a deterrent for having more," Dionisio said.

The staff members will plan activities for the girls, help them with homework, teach them to cook and do laundry, and help them figure out what to do when their babies cry, said Latishia Martin, program coordinator, who will live with the girls.

The renovations that made the building suitable for the young mothers came through various community donations, from Choice Center Worldwide, a leadership program that started last fall, to the Kaiser Foundation, which provided the funding for a modern fire sprinkler system, a crucial part of being able to open the building, Spadafor said.

Other community groups contributed furniture, work and supplies, as well. Members of the Vegas Quilting Bees and Sunrise Circle, which have adopted St. Jude's, toured the new facility admiring the quilts they had made for each room.

Girls will move into their rooms next week, Spadafor said, and Voy said he expected to have the facility filled with referrals very soon.

"I fear it will fill up too soon and two weeks from now, what do I do?" he said.

St. Jude's Ranch for Children



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