

Homeless Teens on San Juan Island

Executive Summary

Part I: The Current Situation on Teen Homelessness in San Juan County

Most Islanders do not know there is a serious teen homelessness issue on San Juan Island and the county as a whole. A small number shelter in vehicles or tents, but most are better described as “unstably housed” without a stable, safe place to live. They couch surf, staying at the homes of friends or family members on sufferance, often moving from one place to another. Some may trade sex for a place to stay, or have a similarly exploitative relationship. There are roughly eighteen such children ages 13-18 on San Juan Island, with a similar number on Orcas.

The reasons vary. The least common is that the entire family is homeless. More often the child is separated from their nuclear family. They may have been kicked out due to conflict with family or other household members or left home for similar reasons, up to and including personal safety. Often substance abuse or mental health issues, their own or of family members, are a factor. Some are staying to finish high school here after their family moved away.

There is no single organization responsible for assisting children not living in their family home and without a formal alternate home or responsible adult in charge of their welfare. Most of these children fall outside the purview of CPS. A number of other organizations are aware of and provide services to unstably housed teens including the Friday Harbor School District, County Juvenile Court Services, the Family Resource Center, SAFE San Juans, County Social Services, and Compass Health. Churches and private individuals help specific people.

Given our close knit community, these organizations often work together to help these children, but currently there is no shelter, foster care, transitional housing, crisis center or other program in the county that offers temporary or medium-term safe housing for unhomed teenagers. Most do have a provisional place to sleep and informal help from community members, but often neither the child or the household are getting the services they need to provide a stable workable situation for everyone.

An emerging solution for rural areas without shelter for teens is Host Home Programs. Building on the fact that many teens uncoupled from their families find refuge with other community members, such programs seek to create a safe and stable alternate home by providing some support and structure for both the child and the host household. Part II of this report is a more detailed look at Host Home Programs and some thoughts about creating one here.

Part II: Thinking About a Youth Host Home Program

Washington state law lets organizations run host home programs with very limited government funding, in which teenagers stay in unlicensed host homes. The programs

are usually in rural communities, like San Juan County, that lack shelters, crisis centers or other programs to support homeless teens. The programs are local solutions that work with existing efforts to help teens not living in their own homes. They recruit host homes and match teens with a place to stay. They support host households with training, 24/7 crisis support, respite care, and perhaps financial or material aid. The programs provide case management to the kids living in host homes and help them plan for independence when they turn 18 and/or graduate.

The prospects for a host home program in San Juan County are good, given the local organizations committed to helping homeless teens and a community with a history of stepping up. To start, a host home program could develop and support volunteer hosts and support teams, and offer case management to teens living away from their family. In time, the program might also create small groups homes, one style with structured support for teens dealing with addiction or issues needing more intensive support, and another with a less structured, boarding house-style environment for more self-directed teens who won't fit easily into a family home. Eventually, an ideal goal might be a public boarding facility/facilities for teens attending high school but not living at home.

A host home program here should be a close collaboration by the non-profit resource centers on San Juan Lopez, and Orcas and county juvenile courts and social services. Each could handle a different part of the program. In the pilot proposal by the SJI FRC, juvenile court services would do the background checks and a significant part of the training for host families, while the resource centers would do case management for the teens and some of the support for host families. SAFE San Juans could potentially provide services such as organizing and running the support groups and being the first point of contact for 24/7 crisis support. A coordinator to do public outreach, recruit host homes and support families, and raise funds could work for the county or a resource centers. The Juvenile Court and possibly the schools would be a key source of referrals to the program.

One challenge to recruiting host home will be overcoming the barriers to people agreeing to host a teen: space, cost, uncertainty about the responsibility; liability, and length of commitment, available support, and lack of trust. A team approach in which community support would include not just households that host a teen, but other who so volunteer to support a host family by offering practical help and moral support, back-up or respite care, and/or financial support or services to help cover costs of hosting a teen. Since most kids now are informally couch-surfing, one challenge will be figuring out how to take some of those informal, unstable situations and convert them into more formal, and service-supported host homes. Community groups could pledge an ongoing commitment to cover a month's worth of rent or mortgage costs for small group homes, and/or financial support for utilities/food/running costs of such homes.