

THE TALK

For foster youths, a therapeutic home

UCAN agency to provide 'security, privacy, healing'



MARY SCHMICH

The walls in the new therapeutic home are made of abuse-resistant drywall.

Zack Schrantz thumped a fist against the fresh gray paint.

"When you're in your 10th placement," he said, "you're going to take it out on the walls."

It was Tuesday morning, and Schrantz, the president of the UCAN social service agency, was showing me around the new "therapeutic youth home" the agency is about to open in North Lawndale.

He thumped the wall again.

"You can't put a fist or a foot or a chair through this easily," he said.

By the end of August, 65 young people will be living on this 7 1/2-acre West Side campus that Tuesday was still rumbling with bulldozers.

They're kids who became wards of the state because their parents couldn't, or simply didn't, take care of them.

Some have had almost as many homes — placements — as they've had birthdays, and in each new place they've encountered a new set of rules, a new set of people, new reasons to punch a wall.

"When they come to us," Schrantz said, "they have no reason to trust this will be any different."

But everything about this new home is designed with the idea that it will be different, and not just because the AC works and the floors are stylish laminate planks instead of the battered carpet in the old North Side building UCAN sold to help finance the new enterprise.

This home is designed to provide three things that Schrantz repeats like a mantra: "Security, privacy, and healing."

Schrantz, who began working as a foster care case manager at 22, uses the word "heal" a lot.

Not reform. Not fix. Not change. Heal.

It's the language of the physician, not the jailer, an

important distinction. This is not a juvenile detention center.

Some of the kids who will live here may have broken a law, but that's not why they're in a group home. They're there to recover from the traumas they've endured in their short lives.

"Security, privacy and healing," Schrantz repeated as we walked around.

We peeked into the giant gym, where a worker was tidying up the stripes on the shiny floor. We passed living rooms and therapy rooms and a nook for washer-dryers, twice as many here as at the old place.

"For teenagers, very important," Schrantz said.

We rode an elevator to a residential floor.

The small bedrooms, each for one occupant, flank short hallways, all of the doors visible from a small glass-walled office where staff members can sit when they're not out mingling.

The beds, made of hard plastic, are bolted to the floor, so they're hard to disassemble. The big windows allow a lot of light but don't open.

The exterior doors have a "delayed egress," meaning that a 10-second alarm will sound when someone tries to leave without permission.

Healing comes with certain practical restraints.

"No breakable light fixtures," Schrantz said, pointing to a light fastened high on a bedroom wall. "Or anywhere you could hide something to harm yourself."

UCAN's big new campus on West Fillmore Street was once part of the Sears, Roebuck & Co. empire. The land sat empty for 40 or so years, occupied by weeds and trash, or, for a while, a community garden, while much of the neighborhood around it withered.

But even in a neighborhood desperate for investment, the agency's arrival wasn't immediately welcomed.

Schrantz recalls an early community meeting at the nearby Sunrise Baptist Church. A woman stood up.

"Let me be clear," he remembers her saying. "We love the work you do. But



MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Fred Long, left, UCAN's director of government affairs and donor relations, and Zack Schrantz, president and CEO, look over one of the nearly finished youth bedrooms at the agency's new "therapeutic youth home" at 3640 W. Fillmore St.



Finishing touches are put on the main entrance to UCAN's new home on a 7 1/2-acre campus in North Lawndale that used to be part of Sears, Roebuck & Co.

we don't want you here."

The UCAN staff, however, thought it was an ideal spot. One reason was that many of the kids who come into the foster care system come from the vicinity of North Lawndale, and this was a chance to keep them connected to their families.

It was also a way of investing in the neighbor-

hood.

Schrantz says that half the spending on the project — a mix of public and private financing — has gone to minority- and female-owned firms. Sixty or so people from the area have been hired to work jobs that will remain when construction is done.

A few days ago, some of

the young people who will move in attended a nearby block party and helped collect trash. It was a way for them to meet the neighbors and the neighbors to see who they are.

"It's not kiddie jail," said Fred Long, UCAN's director of government affairs.

Long, who was taking the tour with us, knows

how "UCAN kids" are sometimes perceived. He knows because he was one.

He spent much of his childhood in foster care then lived for a while in a UCAN apartment in Rogers Park.

A few years ago, he and four other "UCAN guys" recorded a CD that included such songs as "Group Home Felon," which played on the misperception.

Still, he and Schrantz know that healing is hard work, slow work. The new kitchenettes, the playing fields and the healing garden come with no guarantees.

If putting this home in North Lawndale makes it easier for some kids to stay connected to their families, it could also make it easy for them to slip into old temptations. Making it work will take trust. It will take time. It takes hope.

"This is risky business," Schrantz said. "We are working with very vulnerable young people, very vulnerable families. There are no easy answers. But if we don't try to do our part, who's going to?"

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