

Jacob's Place provides unique opportunities for Omaha youth

By Christian Rush

Jacob's Place, a local transitional living complex, provides solace for boys and girls ages 17 to 20, whether homeless or aging out of the foster care system.

Jacob's Place offers housing and emotional support in addition to education and independent living skills that allow those who complete the program to obtain a job or continue their education.

"The fact that Jacob's Place not only serves the youth who are homeless, but also those young men and women who are aging out of the system," says Brandy Gustoff, program manager of transition services at Jacob's Place. "This is what really makes us unique."

With more than 20 years of experience working with at-risk youth, Gustoff started her journey working at a juvenile detention center. She was inspired to make a change by the stories of the troubled youth she worked with.

Eighteen of the young men and women currently residing in the program are either homeless or wards of the state.

The program at Jacob's Place involves independent living training classes, employability skills, life skills and personal development.

"We want to make sure that the young men and women in the program are working on developing as a whole person, not just career oriented," Gustoff says. "We want them to finish the program as well-rounded individuals."

To be admitted into the Jacob's Place program, an application must be filled out and a one-on-one interview must be conducted. Gustoff says anyone considering the program must have a desire to succeed. Applicants must also have a lack of violence in their background and least six months post-hospitalization in a mental health facility for treatment of suicidal tendencies or inflicted self-harm.



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless

Gustoff, a veteran in helping at-risk youth, has worked at the Omaha Home for Boys since 2012. She holds several positions including vice chair of the Educare Policy Committee and co-chair of the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH) youth task force.

Of all the programs she's been part of, she was especially honored when the CEO of the Omaha Home for Boys allowed her to revamp the Jacob's Place program.

Some of the changes include the requirement for applicants to finish high school before entering into the program and pay rent, which prepares them to live on their own.

In 2016, 42 percent of participants completed the program – double the percentage before Gustoff's changes to the program.

"I really want to help make a change, to help teach that there is hope and there is light," Gustoff says. "When we have a young person complete the program and embrace their own life and move into their own home...that's something I can't describe."

