

VinCare Services of Austin Reaches Out to Street Youth and Families with Female Providers

By: Kerri Thompson

Less than ten years ago, members of a small prayer group based out of St. Austin's Catholic Church noticed that there was a persistent problem of too many people living on the streets in the Austin area. Instead of sitting back and watching the problem grow, the group decided to come up with a plan to help. They began brainstorming ways in which they would be most effective in servicing the Austin homeless population. After extensive research, they were able to conclude that female-headed families were among those that were in most need of help and that the biggest gap in the continuum of care was in transitional housing. Due to the group members' background in social service and business, they were able to create an organization that filled this gap.

In September of 2000, VinCare Services of Austin became an official faith-based service organization. In an effort to meet their mission, "to enhance the quality of life of homeless persons in Austin," VinCare Services currently manages two distinct programs: Outreach to Street Youth and St. Louise House. Each program attends to the needs of two very significant homeless populations here in Austin.

Originally a ministry of St. Austin's Catholic Church and surrounding university churches, Outreach to Street Youth (OSY) was a way to address the basic needs of homeless youth between the ages of 12-22. Today, the program is operated by VinCare Services, in collaboration with LifeWorks, and provides basic, valued services such as hot meals, warm clothing, and safe, warm shelter on freezing nights. Each year, OSY provides an estimated 2,600 hot meals. VinCare Services has increased their support for the program and continues to serve homeless street youth each year.

In addition to OSY, VinCare Services operates the St. Louise House, a single-site apartment style transitional housing program geared toward families with female providers. Since its inception in October of 2001, the program has helped house 45 families. According to Sharon Bieser, Executive Director of VinCare Services, most residents are referred to the organization from shelters such as the Salvation Army, SafePlace, and LifeWorks, and their length of stay ranges from 2 months to 20 months.



*Sharon Bieser, Executive
Director of VinCare Services*

St. Louise House requires an extensive application. Ms. Bieser describes their relationship as a partnership. In other words, they have to work together in order for the resident to become completely self-sufficient. Residents are required to attend weekly case management meetings with the staff and have to earn some income so they can pay for a phone line and monthly rent (lowest rent is \$20). However, VinCare Services is more than willing to work with them if they have acquired debt and cannot pay in full.

St. Louise House encourages residents to receive their GED, if they have not already done so. After all, a GED can make the difference between minimum wage earnings and living wage. While in the job search program, they practice interviewing, resume writing, and punctuality.

Life-management skills are also very important when attempting to become fully self-sufficient. St. Louise House enables families to acquire the skills they need to live independently, such as budgeting, parenting skills, and meal planning.

As of today, 83% of St. Louise House residents have achieved their goals and have moved on to stable housing. However, many residents have a hard time leaving the enjoyable, supportive experience in which they had become so accustomed. In fact, a recent St. Louise House alumnus, Bianca, described her experience as, "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step." Another resident said that leaving was "bittersweet." Although they are currently in stable housing, former residents are welcome to come back for continued case management.

Because St. Louise House has proved to be such a success, VinCare Services hopes to open another site in the near future. With the generous contributions of individual donors, foundations, and small family donors their dreams might become a reality.

If You Would Like to Help Out:

VinCare Services always welcomes volunteers for their OSY and St. Louise House programs. If you wish to participate, please contact Sharon Bieser at 512-302-0027 or via e-mail bieser@vincare.org.

In addition, they are currently accepting donations from their wish list, which includes items such as twin mattresses, twin sheets, twin comforters, dining tables and chairs, small appliances, and H-E-B gift cards.

St. Louise House Living Quarters

