

Safe Haven Offered To Children In Custody Disputes

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By Charita M. Goshay, Repository Staff Writer

Canton, Ohio. The toys, storybooks and kid-sized furniture belie the seriousness of its purpose.

Each week, parents and their children come to the second floor of Trinity Lutheran Church's Urban Ark building at 130 DeWalt Ave. NW, site of the Safe Haven Supervised Visitation Program.

The nonprofit program, designed to provide a safe, nonthreatening atmosphere for children at the center of custody disputes, was created in 2004 by Trinity member Cindy Bratanov, in conjunction with Stark County Family Court.

On Wednesdays and alternative weekends, volunteers monitor court-ordered visits between children and noncustodial parents. Monitors also supervise child drop-offs.

"Everyone is committed to the success of the process," Bratanov said. "It helps children to avoid anxiety, and it gives them a safe place where they can spend time with their parent."

Working with Bratanov is Stark County Family Court Liaison Rosemary Diamond, who said that every effort is made to ensure that no parental disputes occur during visits. Parents enter and leave through separate entrances if necessary, and on-site security is provided by a Canton police officer.

Diamond said substance abuse, domestic violence or anything deemed threatening to a child are some of the criteria used by judges and magistrates in ordering families to participate in the program.

"The court's main focus is the best interests of the children, not the parent," she said. "Small kids don't care that their parent is an addict, or alcoholic or an abuser. To them, their parents are heroes. The court believes that as long as we can guarantee their (child's) safety, every child deserves a parent."

The program is free. Some similar programs charge a sliding fee.

"Many parents we work with are financially limited," Diamond said. "We don't believe parents should have to pay to see their kids. This church, this director, have done a benefit to Stark County," she said. "Without them, many kids would grow up without a mother or father."

Bratanov said the program wouldn't exist without its volunteers, which have grown from four to 12. An Aultman Hospital therapy dog also is a component of the program.

"Everyone there is driven by the needs of the children," she said. "We try to be really family friendly."

Diamond noted that the original \$10 million provided by the Children's Rights Council in 1996 to establish visitation programs nationwide is nearly depleted, and that a \$50,000 earmark requested by Rep. Ralph Regula, R- Bethlehem Township, was cut from the final federal budget.

The program is surviving on a Paul David Foundation Grant.

In addition to money, more volunteers are needed. No previous educational, social-service or court experience is necessary.

Housing the program is part of Trinity Lutheran's mission to serve the larger community, said the Rev. Darlene Grega, senior pastor at Trinity since August.

"It's amazing how the monitors relate to the kids, so in every way, they feel safe here," she said. "I think it's important that even in the midst of brokenness in their lives, they don't experience it here."

Grega noted that despite dwindling numbers and resources, those church members who have remained are committed to programs such as the Safe Haven program and the church's weekly TLC food and clothing giveaways. She recently hosted an open house at Urban Ark building to field suggestions on other uses for the building.

"Our congregation, like any downtown congregation, has an eye and a heart for mission and ministry," Grega said.

For information about the visitation program, contact Bratanov at (330) 575-7471 or Diamond at (330) 451-7435. Grega may be reached by calling (330) 456-0124.



Scott Heckel

SAFE HAVEN FOR KIDS Stark County Family Court Liaison Rosemary Diamond (left) and Cindy Bratanov spearhead the Safe Haven Supervised Visitation Program, a court-ordered program that provides noncustodial parents supervised visitation with their children. Bratanov, who created the program, is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in downtown Canton, which has provided space and financial support.