

A place to be together

Church opens its doors to supervised visits between parents and kids



ED MURPHY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Blair Sauderhoefer gets a hug from his mother, Marlene Garibaldi, during a visit at the Safe Harbor Child Access Center run by the Zarephath Christian Church.

By PEGGY O'CROWLEY
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

George arrived at the campus of the Zarephath Christian Church recently with two large shopping bags stuffed with craft supplies, sandwiches and drinks, a potted tulip, and lots of excitement.

That's because George was seeing his two children for the first time in two weeks, since his last supervised visit at the Safe Harbor Child Access Center run by the church. For the next two hours, with a volunteer quietly sitting by the door, he and his children made cards, had lunch and caught up on their lives.

"I like this place a lot," said George, whose full name is not disclosed to protect the identity of his children. "The people here are really beautiful, and the facility is clean and pleasant."

The center, which is sanctioned for referrals from the Somerset County Family Court, is a model for supervised visitation programs for parents who are not allowed to see their children without monitoring.

Unlike traditional programs held in county courthouses around the state, there are no armed sheriff's guards outside the meeting room, and each family gets a large room to itself equipped

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Nancy Fallows, executive director of the Supervised Visitation Network

with toys and video games. The center is located in a trailer that serves as the church's Sunday school.

Such programs are springing up across the country, according to Nancy Fallows, executive director of the Supervised Visitation Network, a national group based in Tennessee.

In the last 10 years, the numbers of centers in the network has doubled from about 250 to 510. Most of them are nonprofits like Safe Harbor, while about 20 percent are for-profits, she said.

The growth is in response to the rising numbers of supervised visitations ordered by judges across the country, she said.

"There's been an increase in awareness. The

courts are beginning to see that supervised visitation is a better alternative to putting a child at risk or not having any contact with the parent," she said.

Fallows said New Jersey is one of the few states that provide visitation services in county courthouses.

As of the last fiscal year, the state's Administrative Office of the Courts administered 641 cases of supervised visitation, according to Michele Walsh, the coordinator of such programs for the state. The Division of Youth and Family Services handles the supervised visitation cases involving allegations or incidents of neglect or abuse.

Court orders that require visits between parents and children to be monitored usually involve cases in which non-custodial parents may be experiencing psychological or substance abuse problems. Or there may be a restraining order against them because of a domestic violence charge.

Each county operates a program in its courthouse on Saturdays, and facilities vary. Besides the courthouses, some counties have alternative sites.

Those too, vary. Monmouth County, for instance, offers nine sites other than its Freehold (See VISITS, Page 48).

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courthouse, ranging from YMCAs to a library and a church, according to a state list of providers. But Union County has none, according to the list.

Some providers, like Catholic Charities of the Metuchen Diocese, charge a fee. That can be a burden to parents who are also paying child support and perhaps alimony, said Erik Purasson, the founder and president of Safe Harbor Child Access Centers.

Purasson said he approached the Zarephath Christian Church, which is located within Somerset County's Franklin Township, about the center because he felt there was a need for a neutral and welcoming place for children to meet

their parents. The center is staffed by trained volunteers, most of whom belong to the historic church. Its services are free.

"First of all, we're part of the community, not a state entity, and many people see this as a ministry. They are not salaried employees," said Purasson, a kitchen designer who is married to a divorce mediator. "If you go to the Middlesex County courthouse, you will be met by an armed sheriff's officer and go to a lounge in the basement where you might be sharing space with other families."

"A courthouse carries a whole lot of negative connotations. Kids and parents are intimidated by it. Independent centers try to make it a positive experience for the children," Fallows said.

That's the reasons members of Zarephath signed on the project. "The parents and children have got to see each other, they've got that right," said Ardis Weaver, a church member and head of the volun-

teers. "They need a safe, relaxed environment."

The monitors follow the protocols set by the Supervised Visitation Network, guidelines that require parents to come and leave on time, to refrain from speaking negatively about the other parent, and not to ask monitors for advice. Unacceptable behavior is not tolerated; monitors are trained to call police after one verbal warning.

That hasn't been necessary, said Purasson, since the center has not had any incidents that required police intervention.

The two-hour biweekly visits usually begin with the non-custodial parent arriving first and being shown to a room. Then the custodial parent or guardian arrives to drop off the children.

A monitor sits in the room during the visits. The parent is given a five-minute warning when the visit is nearly over; a monitor then takes the child to the door to meet his or her custodial parent. The idea is

that the parents, many of whom have been in high-conflict relationships, do not see or speak to each other unless they both agree to it.

Still, it's nowhere near a perfect arrangement, said Marlene Garibaldi, a client who has been meeting her son, Blair Sauerhoefer, at the center since the beginning of the year. On a recent morning, they played with an electronic race track, but their reunions are bitter-sweet for Garibaldi, who missed spending Mother's Day — Blair's sixth birthday — with her son.

Garibaldi has filed a motion to see her son on weekends without monitoring, but the case has not been heard yet, she said.

"It's a shame it has to be like this," she said in a telephone interview a few days after her last visit, adding that she feels the center should be better equipped.

Blair's father, John Sauerhoefer, said he is comfortable at the center. "They're nice here, and it's better than before when DYFS used to

come to the house and pick him up," he said. "And he gets more time with his mother here."

One of the goals for staff is to help the families transition to monitored exchange services, in which parents drop off and pick up children for weekend visitation under the supervision of monitors, usually on Friday and Sunday evenings. Eventually, it is hoped they will then be able to handle visitation on their own, Purasson said. Families can also sign up for parenting time mediation services to work out problems.

Exchange services are needed through the country, said Fallows.

The state chapter of the Council for Children's Rights, an advocacy group for non-custodial parents, is trying to get those services up and running in churches throughout north and central New Jersey.

One program that has started to get clients is at the First Baptist Church of Westfield, where volunteers supervise the exchange on alternate Friday and Sunday eve-

nings. The Administrative Office of the Courts recently approved the site, said the Rev. Darla Dee Turlington, the senior pastor of the church.

Previously, area parents used local police stations as exchange points. "This is a much better environment for the children," Turlington said. "Many of our volunteers are divorced parents themselves, so they are aware of the need."

During the exchange, the custodial parent and children wait in a playroom for the non-custodial parent to appear, and the children are transferred, witnessed by volunteers.

Safe Harbor, which is opening another center in Passaic, now has 20 families using the Zarephath center. Purasson hopes to open new locations, and provide parenting classes and referrals to attorneys and mediators.

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