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Boys home closing, but numbers don't tell full story

By Burt Constable | Daily Herald Columnist

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When the goal is turning around lives of young abused and neglected boys, filling out the scoresheet is more complicated than simply marking wins or losses.

For the past 15 years, Ann G. Deuel has lived in Arlington Heights, but her heart has resided in Jamal Place, a three-story graystone at 1335 S. California Ave. in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago. As a founder and executive director of Jamal Place, Deuel can tell countless stories about the boys, ages 11 to 17, who have spent time in the group home and about the army of suburbanites from St. Charles, Naperville, Lake Zurich and Lisle who have volunteered, donated and served on the board to help those kids. Lots of people in that field have good things to say about Deuel and Jamal Place.

But when the new fiscal year begins on July 1, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services will not renew its contract with Jamal Place, forcing those kids to go to other facilities.

"To shut us down and deny kids this opportunity is unconscionable," says Deuel, as she takes a deep breath and dabs at her eyes in an attempt to keep her emotions in check.

She and her staff operated last year through a \$1,041,000 contract with DCFS to provide a group home for 10 wards of the state. They've carved out a wonderful reputation in 15 years, so what happened?

The easy answer is that DCFS put the group home under a new performance-based contracting system that determined Jamal Place fell short of benchmarks for keeping kids from running away, requiring hospitalization or ending up in juvenile detention.

"Taxpayers expect and deserve positive results in the children we serve," says DCFS spokesman Kendall Marlowe. Jamal Place simply didn't measure up in the areas the state measures.

Because Illinois has trimmed the number of wards of the state from a high of 52,000 in 1997 to only 15,500, a much higher percentage of those kids have mental illnesses, substance abuse or other problems. Since the state measures an agency's performance by days that the kids are physically present in the home, Jamal Place, with its small population, got bad marks when a child was hospitalized for a mental-health issue or detained by a judge.

"We did what was clinically advisable for these children and we got dinged for it," says Brian Barclay, assistant executive director of Jamal Place. "We did what was in kids' best interest."

There is no consideration given for "incremental improvements in youth behavior, which occur as trusting relationships develop," Deuel notes. "I wish they could find a way to measure the individual aspects."

When compared with similar facilities, Jamal Place graded lower, Marlowe says, adding that it "isn't a happy day" when the state ends an agreement with a facility that has "good people" and has done "good work" in the past. He says DCFS did renew a contract with Deuel for a different transitional living facility that serves an older population.

One of Jamal Place's "unfavorable" outcomes involves a kid who already had a criminal record when he came to the group home at age 14. Now 17, he says he ended up in juvenile court after he made a mistake by hanging with the wrong people on the day when he stole a woman's purse.

"I've got a good relationship with the staff and residents. We did things as a family," says the teen, who now is living with a grandmother. "I love my grandmother, but I'd rather be at Jamal Place. I'm trying to do everything in my power to get back to Jamal Place."

Intangibles aren't part of the bureaucratic process. There isn't a place on an evaluation form to give credit to Deuel and her staff for leading the effort that closed a local "crack house." There's no way to measure the improvements in a former resident that led him for the first time to sign "love" before his name on the Mother's Day card he sent Deuel this year. There's no scoresheet for the local gang leader who stopped preying on Jamal kids when he was confronted by Deuel and recognized her as the woman who gave him a Christmas present a few years earlier. The interview for this story is interrupted when that man calls Deuel, who is helping him find a legitimate job.

"It is enormously frustrating to me that the attachment the boys develop with our staff members is not a 'measurable' outcome," Deuel says. "These are our children. Long after DCFS is done with these kids, our door is still open."

Last weekend, many former residents came back to explain how Jamal Place helped them. On June 26, Jamal Place will celebrate its 15th anniversary with a picnic and walkathon in Douglas Park, across the street from the home. Deuel and her staff are hoping DCFS finds a way to give them more time, another year to continue its mission.

"I've always maintained that God won't let us fail," says Deuel. "For 15 years, that's been the case, and now we've got this challenge."