

Synergy Services Youth Resiliency Project Overview

In August 2009, Synergy Services will complete construction of a 5-acre Homeless Youth Campus located in Kansas City, MO. The campus will include two buildings, an Emergency Shelter for homeless and abused youth ages 12 to 18 and a 24,000 square-foot Youth Resiliency Center. Synergy will also relocate its transitional living program for teens to adjacent apartments. Synergy was strongly motivated to build this new campus since on any given night in Greater Kansas City, the Partnership for Children documents that there are more than 2,000 “unattached” homeless teens living on the streets, sleeping in cars, or “couch surfing” with friends because they do not have a safe place to live. Despite providing more than 60% of Kansas City’s emergency beds for youth, Synergy daily confronts this epidemic of youth homelessness as we turn away one out of every two youth seeking shelter due to lack of capacity. In addition to expanding our capacity, our motivation to create a campus with an expansive Youth Resiliency Center stems from a growing understanding of the importance of providing youth with an ongoing opportunity to connect to a caring and supportive community as well as the ability to develop resiliency “a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma.”¹

For 37 years Synergy has provided shelter and quality care for abused, homeless and runaway youth. Through years of experience, we have found that youth who lack belonging, feel disconnected, and have insecure attachment due to trauma are not able to succeed in the outside world. Synergy, therefore, made the decision to establish a Youth Resiliency Center where young people can learn to manage their emotions, build and practice relationship skills, and develop their own place in the world as they transition into a healthy and successful adulthood. Synergy’s findings have also been validated by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The study found that for all adolescents “connectedness – a feeling of being loved, understood, wanted,

¹ Psychiatric News September 2, 2005. Volume 40, Number 17, page 11

acknowledged – emerged as by far the biggest protector against emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, risky behaviors, chronic mental and physical illness, and cyclical family breakdown.”

Through carefully crafted experiential education and mental health services, Synergy’s new Youth Resiliency Center will offer at-risk young people the means to develop the improved attachment found to be necessary for adolescents’ physical, emotional, and social health. Time after time, young people have told us that being in shelter was “the most positive experience in their lives.” Sad as that is, we have come to realize that for many of the kids we serve, being in shelter was the first time they had a genuine sense of belonging and that feeling of “connectedness” so essential for healthy development. In the absence of connectedness, a child learns to view her or himself as unlovable and incompetent, others as uncaring and untrustworthy, and the world as unsafe and full of threat. However, if a child develops resilience he or she becomes capable of engaging the support of others; forming secure attachments with both personal and social networks; and striving toward personal or collective goals.”² Based on this understanding of attachment and resiliency, we have developed the Resiliency Center, a replicable model that offers the engagement, structure, nurture and challenge necessary for teens to build healthy attachment and resiliency.

From a theoretical basis, Synergy’s Resiliency Center model integrates the work of UCLA child psychiatrist and developmental specialist, Daniel J. Siegel with the philosophy of John Dewey who in 1938 wrote the classic “Experience and Education” proposing the concept of learning through direct experience. Dewey wrote that the key aspects of experiential learning were 1) the immersion of the student in a hands-on project; 2) followed by a period in which the student reflected on his/her experience.³ Dewey did not have the advantage of the growing understanding of brain physiology that reveals that not only is the brain capable at birth of building new neural pathways based on experience, but that it retains that ability throughout life. However, his well-

² Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 2006, 67: [supplement 2] 46-9.

³ Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: MacMillan (reprint 1947).

documented approach to education complements Siegel's landmark work that illustrates that the brain is always capable of changing, that it is especially open to change through relationships, and that new experience can create circuitry that overrides past experience.⁴ Just like the benefit of experiential learning, Siegel documents that adolescent attachment therapy must be experiential. He states that "since the roots of disorders of attachment occur pre-verbally, therapy must create experiences that are healing. Since traumatized children do not easily respond to traditional forms of treatment, experiences, not words, are the "active ingredient" in the healing process."⁵

Youth who are the victims of trauma need experiences to change their life narrative that has told them that adults are inconsistent or hurtful, the world is chaotic, they cannot effectively influence their environment, they can only rely upon themselves, and that they are unlovable and defective. The Youth Resiliency Center is therefore a blend of teen-focused experiences selected to help traumatized youth develop a more positive world view. **Through a combination of strength-based youth development activities, service projects, counseling, and experiential learning, the Center will immerse youth within a therapeutic and healing environment.** This L.E.E.D – silver certified building was intentionally and painstakingly designed to welcome traumatized kids. In our first year of operation, we anticipate serving a minimum of 1,000 youth who will regularly use the services of the Youth Resiliency Center including youth residing in the Emergency Shelter and Synergy's Transitional Living Program.

⁴ Siegel, Daniel J. The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are. New York: The Guildford Press, 1999.

⁵ Interview with Daniel Siegel, MD- Cynthia Levin, Psy.D. Copyright © [CenterSite, LLC](#), 1995-2008