



Giving homeless a head start

Suffolk program sends teachers to shelters to help children and parents prepare for school

BY RHODA AMON
STAFF WRITER

July 17, 2005

"Teacher's coming, mom. She's coming," announces 4-year-old Quydasha Allen, jumping up and down.

The teacher, Sarah Benjamin, arrives laden with books and toys, prepared to spend the day with the child and her young mother as part of a program to prepare them for the years of schooling ahead.

Benjamin is a teacher coordinator in the Parent-Child Home Program of Eastern Suffolk BOCES, which has been working with preschoolers of disadvantaged families through home visits for more than 40 years.

But today's classes don't fit the typical mode. Quydasha and her mother don't have a permanent home. They live in a homeless shelter in Wyandanch.

This visit is part of a mobile outreach program in Suffolk County, the first in the country, to serve children and parents in shelters and other emergency housing arrangements. Currently, 35 homeless families receive the services.

"We want to help these children overcome language and literacy barriers and other obstacles to educational success," said Patrick Foye, executive director of United Way of Long Island, which recently awarded a \$25,000 grant to the mobile outreach program.

Reading, talking, playing and verbal interaction in the early years is vital to a child's future success, Foye said.

Quydasha and her mother, Farrah Allen, 27, are completing a year of home training with Benjamin, the teacher coordinator for the Parent-Child outreach program.

Most children start at age 2 or 3 and go through a two-year program before starting kindergarten. Quydasha started late, "but she's very bright," Benjamin said.

The Wyandanch shelter, a converted residence that looks like any house on the block, is temporary shelter for six or seven single parents and their children while the staff searches for affordable homes for them. That's not an easy task on Long Island, where a typical two-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,324 a month.

"It's so important for these children to get a good education to break free from the homeless cycle," said Dennis Nowak, spokesman for the Suffolk County Department of Social Services. Bringing the home tutoring program into the shelters is a "wonderful start," he said.

Benjamin has trained five other home visitors to work in the shelters. Closed for the summer, the weekly home visits resume in September.

The program, introduced in Freeport in 1965 by Wantagh psychologist Phyllis Levenstein, reaches 5,000 disadvantaged families in 145 sites nationwide, said Sarah Walzer, executive director at the program's national center in Port Washington. Nearly 600 families in Nassau and Suffolk counties participate in the program.

Surveys show that children who complete the home program enter school ready to learn, score at or above national test averages and graduate from high school at the same rate as middle-income students.

The United Way also awarded a \$25,000 grant to the Middle Country Library in Centereach to establish Mothers' Centers in 12 libraries in Nassau and Suffolk. The Mothers Centers are in libraries that are part of the Family Place network, which offers increased services to families with young children.

"Mothers get together and learn from one another. They gain the skill and confidence to advocate for their children," said Theresa Kemp-Zielenski, the United Way's vice president for community impact.

For children in underserved and often at-risk families, the first object is to reduce hunger and improve access to health care, she said. After that, it's important to "take action steps to encourage future success," she said.