

Teaming Up for Teens in the West Metro

Hopkins Elks Lodge program supports homeless youngsters



A Dollar Store employee poses behind personal care support packs items with Teaming Up For Teens volunteers, from left to right, LaNae Spooner, Patrick Wright, Dedria Noll and Gretchen Peterson. (Submitted photo)

A Hopkins Elks Lodge program has supported homeless teens in the West Metro for the past four years.

The program, Teaming Up For Teens, partners with other service organizations to meet the needs of the homeless in the community.

Four years ago, the Hopkins Elks Lodge hosted a drive for teens during winter break to gather coats, holiday gifts, care packages and other needed items.

Getting started

Teaming Up For Teens Program Director Dedria Noll said she felt inspired to help homeless teens after reading a story in the Sun Sailor 11 years ago. The story compared homelessness in the suburbs versus homelessness in the inner cities.

“They called it the ‘hidden homeless,’” Noll said. “They hide the fact that they’re homeless.”

Noll said she and a dedicated group of volunteers assembled emergency packs at her St. Louis Park home for students to make it through spring break and winter break when the schools were closed.

Recently, Teaming Up For Teens has grown and is helping more teens in need in the community.

Personal support packs

Last year, the Elks lodge received a \$10,000 Impact grant from the Elks National Foundation to expand the program and provide personal care “support packs” and other items year-round, said Noll.

The grant, as well as donated money, goods and time from Elks members, community members and partners, has allowed Teaming Up For Teens to provide support packs every month to high schools, police departments and community partners.

These organizations then distribute the packs to teens in need.

“Right now we’re at about 100 bags a month,” Noll said.

Hopkins, Minnetonka and St. Louis Park high schools, as well the Main Street School of Performing Arts, receive the support packs assembled by Teaming Up For Teens volunteers.

Noll eyes future expansion to more schools, but first wants to establish the program in the Hopkins and Minnetonka area.

“We’d like to grow into the whole seven school districts in the west metro,” said Noll. “But we’d like to get saturated in the community before we go to all of them.”

Noll said the personal care support packs fill a specific need for homeless teens in the community. They receive two meals a day at school, and often times spend nights with friends – what Noll called “couch hopping.”

But, what they often lack are personal care items. That’s where Teaming Up for Teens comes in.

The support packs contains a variety of personal hygiene items such as shampoo, soap, deodorant, laundry detergent, toothbrushes, toothpaste, lotion, tissues, feminine products and more, said Noll.

“Often times, a teen will say to me, ‘I’m staying at a friend’s house, but I don’t feel bad asking to do laundry if I provide my own detergent.’” Noll said.

The units are expanded in August as a “back to school” pack with notebooks, pens, pencils, highlighters, calculators, three-ring binders and other school supply essentials.

Later in the year, the program offers a “winter pack” that includes hats, gloves, T-shirts, dry skin and lip salve.

Each pack includes a brochure with information about resources for teens such the myHealth Clinics in Hopkins and Excelsior, Teens Alone and ICA Food Shelf.

Noll said the personal care support packs go a long way to make the students feel as normal as possible.

“The kids feel much more productive when they’re showering and they’re washing their clothes and they’re able to take care of themselves that way,” said Noll. “That’s an important niche that’s not being met right now that we’ve been able to fill.”

The teens

In the west metro seven school districts, it is estimated that there are nearly 150 homeless teens with more than 250 at risk of being homeless on any given night, Noll said, citing statistics provided by the Hopkins nonprofit Teens Alone.

Even while homeless, these teens go to school and many work part-time jobs while trying to hide their homelessness.

Reasons for leaving home include substance abuse, divorce, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, being put out of the home due to sexual orientation, mental health issues and learning disabilities, said Noll.

The teens eat, shower and sleep at homes of friends, other home situations or even at the homes of strangers. They spend nights outside seeking shelter wherever they can. They do their best in school while hoping for a better future.

“We support them before they get led into something more dangerous,” Noll said.



Teaming Up For Teens volunteers, from left to right, LaNae Spooner, Patrick Wright and Dedria Noll shop at the St. Louis Park Dollar Store for items to fill personal care support packs. The support packs are then distributed to schools and other community locations where they are handed out to homeless teens. (Submitted photo)

A growing program

Last month, the Elks Lodge received a second \$10,000 Impact Grant. Noll said Teaming Up For Teens will use this money and other donations to further expand its program.

The program will now distribute “clothing packs” that contain sweatshirts, sweatpants, underwear, gloves, hats, socks and other items.

Noll said the homeless teens are protective of their situation. If it is discovered they are homeless, they run the risk of being pulled from school. Reaching teens can be challenging.

But, Noll said the program is growing and becoming more creditable among those it serves. It also has an online presence.

“These kids are starting to hear about us and trust us,” said Noll. “It’s really starting to come together. We’re really excited about this coming year because we got the grant, as well as the website and Facebook.”

How You Can Help

- Financial donation: All money donated is fully tax deductible because the Hopkins Elks is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. All money donated goes directly to providing the goods and services to teens in need because this is a 100 percent volunteer program.
- Product and goods donation: The Elks accept donated items for its support packs. They must be new and preferably full-sized versions of the products. A complete list of the needed items can be found at teamingupforteens.hopkinselks.org.
- Sponsor a support pack: A \$5 donation sponsors the creation and distribution of a support pack. It also includes an optional card for the sponsor to provide a personalized message and show of support.

For more information, contact Dedria Noll at TeamingUpForTeens@hopkinselks.org or 952-922-3298.

Contact Matthew Hankey at matthew.hankey@ecm-inc.com