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Local group working to help RFK students feel right at home

By Kathy Tamburri
ITEM STAFF

LANCASTER— Imagine a child without a family, or separated from family due to abuse or neglect, moving to a brand new place.

It happens every day, and it happens every year at the Lancaster campus of the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps (RFK) on Old Common Road, where boys (and soon maybe girls), age 6 to 18, live for an average stay of 12 to 15 months while they deal with such circumstances and attend the agency's private special-education school.

On Monday, the campus will dedicate a brand new dormitory with 72 beds in four separate wings, for four different age-grouped programs. In an effort to make the students feel at home in their rooms at the new Lancaster Residence & Family Center, a local "home group" bible study leader is organizing a collection of donated new linens and bedding, dubbed "The Children's Compassion Project."

The group began its project around the beginning of February. According to Ann Cox, manager of public relations and communications for RFK, the dormitory has received a lot of bedding to date, but there are rooms that still need to be outfitted.

"I find it amazing that without our going to the community and asking for donations - which we are often quite willing to do and need to do - this group came to us and asked if they could help," Cox said.

Shelley Courtney, a member of the Trinity Church in Bolton, said she heard about the need for bedding at the Lancaster dormitory from her friend and fellow Bolton resident, Mary Boyd, who has been a longtime volunteer at RFK. Courtney, who had a foster son who lived at RFK 12 years ago, knew it was the "community project" she had been looking for.

"Our bible study group was reading the Rick Warren book, 'The Purpose-Driven Church,' which is a follow-up book to his (best-seller), 'The Purpose-Driven Life,' " Courtney said. The book inspired the group to search for a way to reach out to help its community in some tangible way.

"We wanted to pick a project that would give us an ongoing involvement" with the people they'd be helping. "My husband and I were drawn to (RFK) because our foster son had lived there for two or three years, when he was 14 to 16. This was about 12 years ago, but I know our foster son really benefited from its services. He felt really cared for, there. He went to school there and lived in the residential program. We worked closely with his therapists. He lived with us after he was there, and they were very supportive when he was transitioning to living with us. It's a very difficult population to serve, and I thought they did an outstanding job," Courtney said.

Courtney's group set up a gift registry for donors to purchase pillows, pillowcases, sheets, mattress pads, and blankets from the retailer Linens N Things, which enables people to purchase their donation online or in a store such as the one at the Solomon Pond Mall in Marlboro.

"The goal is to outfit all 72 beds," Courtney said. Members publicized the instructions for donating bedding via the gift registry "through word of mouth at church, in the Florence Sawyer School newsletter, in local newspapers, and in a letter we mailed to friends, family, and neighbors. ÉWe also sent information to other local churches in Bolton,

Lancaster and Clinton," Courtney said.

The nonprofit RFK Children's Action Corps Lancaster Campus currently serves 52 boys. Most of them attend the campus school and live there. A few attend school there as day students only, and one lives at the campus, but attends a local public school during the day, according to Cox.

"The school bus drops him off right at the door," Cox said.

Most students at RFK's Lancaster campus are referred there by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), Cox said. This is not the same as the state's Department of Youth Services (DYS), which is an agency of the juvenile justice system. The RFK Lancaster students are not locked in. The Lancaster campus is a school, not a correctional facility. The students there have not done anything illegal. Other campuses operated by RFK, in other Massachusetts towns, do serve DYS clients, however.

"In a lot of cases, the DYS child was the DSS child who didn't get these kinds of services," Cox said, referring to the therapeutic, educational and emotional help children receive at the Lancaster campus.

Cox said the RFK mission is to carry on the legacy of Robert F. Kennedy by helping at-risk children to develop the skills they need to become successful adults.

The agency was started in 1969 by members of Kennedy's staff who "wanted to honor his legacy with something more meaningful than a statue."

To help with the Children's Compassion Project, or for information about the RFK Children's Action Corps's services, contact Ellen Novia at RFK Children's Action Corps Lancaster Campus, at 220 Old Common Road. The phone number is (978) 365-2803.