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Contribution to aid homeless children

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ARLINGTON- Homeless children growing up in the sometimes dreary surroundings of the Arlington Night Shelter will have an upbeat place to learn, play and discover a brighter side to life beginning next year.

As a beneficiary of Arlington Cares 1993 charity weekend, the night shelter plans to equip its children's room with educational toys and videos that could make a difference in the lives of the 200 homeless children who pass through the shelter annually, said Larry Johnson, executive director.

"The problem we see so often is the loss of hope and self-esteem among these kids," Johnson said. "We want to help them learn how they can feel good themselves."

Arlington Cares President Dee Dee Winters said the organization recently selected four agencies that serve children to be recipients of the annual charity weekend in April. The beneficiaries, in addition to the night shelter, are: Mission Arlington's crisis child-care program, Arlington's Women's Shelter and Arlington's Girls and Youth Services.

At the women's shelter, the money will go toward hiring a second counselor for the Children Can Change program, shelter executive director Mary Lee Hafley said.

"The goal of the program is to teach children safety skills so they can develop their own personal protection plan," she said. "We also help them deal with their feelings and learn nonviolent alternatives to hitting."

The 2-year-old program serves about 650 youngsters from abusive families annually, Hafley said.

Mission Arlington will be able to expand its crisis child-care center, now serving about 47 homeless children a day, said Tillie Burgin, executive director.

"This is the only thing of its kind in the city, so we're so thankful that we'll be able to continue our work," she said. "Because Arlington Cares is helping us, we're able to make sure these kids are really getting the help they need."

The program, which started as twice-weekly day care for homeless children, is open five days a week in the Northwest Christian Church. Learning activities and field trips are provided free to preschool youngsters, which allows their parents to look for work, Burgin said.

Behavior problems among school-age children will be addressed through a new counseling program that officials at Arlington Girls and Youth Services plan to get off the ground with funds from Arlington Cares.

"We hope to address the issue of kids with problems that make it difficult to keep them in after-school programs," said Christine Nusser, executive director for Arlington Girls and Youth Services. "These are good kids but they refuse to stay in after-care programs or they've been asked to leave because of their behavior."

"It's not as dramatic a problem as mental illness but it fits a large number of kids," Nusser said.
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