

NEWS

Black Mountain Home for Children raises awareness for child abuse despite financial cuts

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The Black Mountain Home for Children will hold a fundraising dinner in April to raise awareness for child abuse and shore up dwindling government funding.

According to the federal Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, states are now encouraged to allocate funding to preventative services rather than cottage care programs, such as the Black Mountain Home. The organization's staff say they anticipate replacing more than \$1 million annually, but first it hopes to raise \$100,000 through the fundraiser.

"We want to be independent of government funding because government funding is getting less and less but there's still more kids coming into the system," said Jill Dasher, a member of the Black Mountain Home's board and the chair of the development committee.

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and it is only fitting that the organization's first fundraising event since the pandemic, the Hope for Children Dinner, is set for April 28. Tickets for the dinner sold out immediately, according to Loretta Shelton, director of development and community relations. Tickets for the dinner cost \$150. Local organizations also contribute money through sponsorships of the event.

Abuse and awareness

During the pandemic, many schools closed in-person learning, keeping children at home.

Jimmy Harmon has served as the program director for the Black Mountain Home for nearly three years. He said reports obtained by the organization showed there could be abuse and neglect unreported.

"When the schools reopened in late 2020, there was a huge increase in referrals that we got," Harmon said. "Kids weren't getting services that they need."

Harmon said the organization heard of a significant increase in alcohol and drug use within kids homes, leading to a "black out period" where support staff had no idea what was truly going on.

Harmon said providing services to children in need remains important now more than ever.

"Our referrals tripled in some cases," Harmon said. "We went from getting 30 to 40 referrals a month to over 100 referrals a month."

The organization has a multi-layered system to prevent, identify and stop child abuse. This includes rigorous screening of volunteers and visitors and a mandatory policy requiring concerns to be reported immediately.

Harmon said the Black Mountain Home aims to ensure all children and young adults entrusted to its care are protected.

The Black Mountain Home aims to not just provide kids with a place to stay, but also with basic utilities and a purpose. Dasher said bringing attention to child abuse helps the organization support kids who may be at risk.

"It's not something that's fun to talk about," Dasher said. "No one wants to highlight that there are a lot of kids being abused but it needs to be discussed."

Fundraising amidst cutbacks

Especially during the pandemic, raising funds without government support has proved crucial to the Black Mountain Home.

In February, 2018, the federal government passed the Family First Prevention Services Act. According to North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, this act encompasses the most sweeping piece of federal legislation to impact child welfare financing in decades.

"It moves funding from cottage care, programs like ours, to preventative services," Harmon said. "We're all for preventative services."

One aspect of the federal change plans for funding and services to go toward keeping children safely in their homes without being removed to foster care.

More than 250,000 youth live in residential or group homes, according to Harmon. He said teenagers in particular are in need of homes.

Black Mountain Home opened a thrift store and cafe on its campus to raise funding. It also offers a donation-based facility for weddings and other events.

Joe Lordi serves as the president of Grove Stone and Sand Co., a gravel and stone company located directly across from the Black Mountain Home for Children. He said his company naturally connected with the organization through sharing a physical space near Lake Eden.

Lordi serves as the presenting sponsor of the April fundraiser.

"For years and even generations our operations have been in close contact," Lordi said. "They've let us utilize their campus in different ways for annual events for our company."

Lordi described Grove Stone's relationship with the Black Mountain Home as a "real partnership" as opposed to just a financial backer. He said the dedication of the home separates the organization from others.

Dasher credited the organization's donor base with the Black Mountain Home's success. Through fundraising, Dasher hopes to eliminate the need for government funding.

Dasher said she's seeing cottage organizations and foster homes closing across the nation as a result of the pandemic. She said fortunately, the Black Mountain Home is in no danger of closing.

Services offered by the Black Mountain Home for Children

Harmon said the organization's positive reputation is known throughout the region.

"It's not a system, per se," Dasher said, who's background as a foster parent helped connect her with the organization. "We want these children to feel loved, we want them to feel safe, there's no rushing them out of here."

The Black Mountain Home is licensed to train and prepare families to foster children. The organization partners with community groups to provide services, currently serving 86 children and youth.

"We've got a continuum of care that stretches from birth through college and beyond," Harmon said. "We help kids at each level."

While ageing out of foster care often creates challenges for young adults, Harmon said the youth at the organization never age out, meaning the home continues to provide support through early adult life "and beyond."

According to Shelton, the Black Mountain Home boasts a graduation rate of about 89%.

For youth 18 years and older, the Black Mountain Home provides an independent living program as well as apprenticeships. Harmon said tracks span from culinary arts to outdoor recreation to maintenance and automotive.

These paid apprenticeships partner youth with community organizations which often lead to full-time positions, according to Harmon.

"It's something really unique to Black Mountain Home," he said.

Ezra Maille covers the town of Black Mountain, Montreat and the Swannanoa Valley. Please support local journalism with access to more breaking news by subscribing.

