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Lutherwood shows off new home for troubled kids

Renovated Lutherwood can take in more kids

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The oldest treatment center in Marion County for children with emotional problems unveiled a new building Wednesday that will mean room for more kids to receive help.

The \$10 million Lutherwood Residential Treatment Center includes a chapel with glass walls, four spacious dormitories and two classrooms. Though the center opened in April, officials and residents celebrated a grand opening Wednesday morning.

For 125 years, Lutherwood has helped troubled youths struggling with addictions, trauma, or behavioral or emotional problems.

More than 180 staff members oversee the Eastside center and provide personal supervision and instruction. Treatment can cost \$220 to \$340 per day, depending on the child's needs. The average stay is nine months.

One 16-year-old resident said she found the center gave her a creative outlet that helps her control her anger. The teen writes songs, paints and wants to learn culinary arts. She has been at Lutherwood since November and is scheduled to leave next month and work on her high school diploma through Job Corps, a federal vocational program for young adults.

The Indianapolis Star is not naming the youths at the center because of the sensitivity of their trauma.

"For the kids under our care, this becomes their home," said Michael Johnson, executive director of Lutheran Child & Family Services, the nonprofit group that oversees the treatment center.

The center's goal is to help kids smoothly move back into the community.

"We teach them basic living skills -- how to buy groceries, cook, cut grass," said Bob Kassing, board vice president for the Lutheran charity's foundation. The former building, which was more than 50 years old, seemed dark and gloomy.

Now it has been leveled to make room for the second phase of the renovation project: the Family Strengthening Center, slated to open next July. That center will help families by providing counseling, parenting classes, employment opportunities and assistance with food, clothing and other needs.

The new dormitories surround an open common area that feels homier, and the building includes private areas for therapy sessions or family visits.

The construction means Lutherwood now can help 87 kids instead of 67.

One 15-year-old girl asked to be sent to Lutherwood after a spate of fights, cutting herself and other trouble. She arrived in April.

"I needed help," she said, pointing to the scars on her arms where she had cut herself.

She made a collage that represented who she was and how she has changed, and now she gets along better with her peers and gets into fewer fights. She had three goals when she came: Learn to cook and clean, and find out how to care for her grandfather, who is partially blind.

Johnson, the director, said he understands well the power of programs such as Lutherwood.

"I grew up in Chicago public housing, in a neighborhood infested with gangs," he said. "Great ministries like these kept me busy with programs, off the streets and out of trouble."

