

Phoenix Center helps families rebuild

By Lark Reynolds
Contributing writer

Special services
free women, teens
from addiction

In the words of Adam Brickner, executive director of the Phoenix Center, the organization is essentially "the substance abuse authority for Greenville County." While the agency has a rich history of providing prevention and treatment services to county residents from all walks of life, two of its programs focus on helping specific groups find freedom from addiction.

Serenity Place, a 16-bed treatment facility, focuses its addiction recovery services on pregnant women and their families. The program has a three-pronged strategy that aims to strengthen both mother and child — or children — and the family unit as a whole, Brickner said.

"The first thing is to heal the mother," he said. "The second thing we want to do is to help the child develop appropriately. A lot of times when women come into the program, because of their addiction, there is a neglect issue involved."

At Serenity Place, everyone involved — each mom and each child — has her or his own individualized treatment plan. The mother's, of course, focuses on breaking addiction, while each child works to catch up on developmental milestones that may have been neglected because of the home environment.

"A lot of these kids come in where, because of mom's addiction, they haven't been read to very often, or they don't know their colors, or their ABCs," Brickner said.

But perhaps the key, Brickner said, is the fact



Phoenix Center's White Horse Academy, which offers specialized treatment for adolescent males, opened in May 2010. STAFF/FILE

that it's the family unit itself, rather than either mom or children, that's treated as the patient.

"The focus is trying to keep this family unit from collapsing, and instead, to strengthen that," Brickner said.

Length of stay averages around six months, and the ultimate goal is to see the family re-integrate into the community and be successful. Brickner said a woman who graduated from the program 15 years ago visited the office recently with her now-19-year-old son.

"She says he's not using drugs, not in gangs, not in jail, and he's just doing

great," Brickner said. "It was really the personification of everything that we try to do at Serenity Place, in terms of keeping the mom strong so she can parent her child."

Another program, much newer, provides residential treatment services aimed specifically at adolescent and teen-age males with substance abuse problems. It's called White Horse Academy, and it was begun in May 2010.

The academy is one of only two such programs in the state. Another, in Orangeburg, serves both boys and girls. Brickner said that was originally the plan for White Horse, too,

but when they looked at the numbers at the Orangeburg program, the waiting list for boys was much longer than the one for girls.

"We felt it was better for the system if we opened up an all-male facility so that we could bring down that waiting list for boys," he said.

The boys in the program participate in numerous activities during their three- to four-month stays. There is a garden on-site, which Brickner said serves as a great teaching opportunity, as well as a good source of nutrition.

"Some of them like the garden, some of them don't

like the garden, but it certainly provides a rich opportunity to have a conversation about taking care of their bodies," he said.

There is also a high and low ropes course, which Brickner said provides these teen-agers who are clearly risk-takers and thrill-seekers with an appropriate outlet for those emotions and feelings. And the curriculum also includes a musical component, so that the limbic, or emotional, portion of their brains are reached in addition to the cognitive.

Academy staff members also work with the boys' families to ensure the most supportive envi-

ronment possible upon patients' return to their homes. The results, mostly anecdotal at this point, are encouraging nonetheless.

"What we're hearing from the parents is that the child is markedly different when they return home from the program," Brickner said. "They're making their bed. They're showing up for dinner. They're being more polite."

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www.phoenixcenter.org