

Just after I sent out my last newsletter I went on an orientation retreat for all of the Young Adult Volunteers who are serving at national sites. We went to Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian retreat center in New Mexico, for most of the last week of September. We had meetings during the week to give us some more information about the program and to discuss issues that we may be confronting such as issues of race in ministry, but were also given a good deal of time to get to know the other volunteers and spend some time enjoying the beauty of our surroundings. My roommate at Ghost Ranch was Patrick Hammontree, who is a friend of mine from UT who I went to church with while I was in Austin. It was nice to see a few friendly faces and have a chance to reconnect with them.

The church I have decided to attend here is Georgia Avenue Church, which is a community based church in that is just down the street. They use to be affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, but at the moment they are not affiliated with any denomination. Georgia Avenue is a small church, but they are very active in the community, and most of their members come from the surrounding area. Their major program is 4 food co-ops that help bring food to 200 families in the community to help supplement what they can afford.

As I told you last month, my placement site, Decatur Cooperative Ministry, has 3 major programs, and I wanted to share with you what our program that provides financial assistance does. The assistance program is called Project Take Charge and its main purpose is to prevent homelessness. Project Take Charge provides up to one month of rent or three months of utilities to families that are about to either be evicted or have their utilities turned off. All recipients must show that they have an income that can normally support their rent and utilities, and they are required to attend financial management classes. The income requirement is to ensure that this assistance will truly prevent them from being evicted, and not just push eviction back a month. The financial management classes teach clients how to budget, how much should be allocated for various expenses, such as rent, food, transportation and savings, and also teach participants how to build support systems so they can use them if needed in the future. The assistance is intended to be given only once per family to help in an emergency situation, and the classes are designed to teach clients how to be prepared for future emergencies if they should occur.

For the last month I have primarily been focusing on helping to develop the activities for the children to do and finding online resources for the mothers. I am finding that it can be a challenge to develop comprehensive activities because the age range of the children in the shelter can be from newborn to 16 or 17, so I need to have activities possibly ready for ages 3-17. Every night in the shelter is different, and I have quickly learned that most do not go I have planned and I that I have to be ready for anything, because when I am working with the children my goal is to help make this time as easy as possible for the children, and I believe that requires me to meet them where they are every day. Some days the kids have had long days and are tired, some days they want to go outside and run around, and some days they want to do the activities I have planned. Knowing that this is a very stressful time in the children's lives, I do my best to meet them where they are that day, and if they want to run around outside instead of doing my activity, I just push it back to the next day. One thing that I am already seeing with most of the children in the shelter is how quickly they will bond with me when they realize that I am in the shelter on a regular basis and am there to work with them. In this time of transition for them, I feel that a big part of my job is to help provide some stability and structure when they are in the shelter.

In the month and a half that I have been working at my site, I have had a chance to get to talk with some of the mothers and hear their stories. Something that I have noticed in talking with the mothers and also talking with people on the phone who are looking for shelter or financial assistance is that many the people who are looking for assistance have jobs, but they have run into hard times and just need some help to get back up on their feet. A major emphasis of all of our programs, and I part I strongly believe in, is to empower our clients so that they will be better equipped to deal with any problems they encounter in the future.

Sincerely,
Joshua Newton