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For boys on their own, a house becomes a home

By Katherine McInerney, Globe Correspondent | October 19, 2008



Architects' renderings show plans for the Putnam House basement. The music studio (above) will allow residents to pursue creative interests while the lounge will be a space for the young men to hang out, play games, and use the Internet.

In many ways, it's your typical group house. Five young men living on their own for the first time - they cook, clean, and do their own laundry while working and going to school. But the guys at Dorchester's Putnam House are not your average teenagers.

Without steady parents or guardians to care for them and help them transition into the adult world, the boys who live here have come up through the foster care system. They're wards of the state, and it's a critical time in their lives because within a few years, they will age out of foster care.

Operated by Cambridge Family & Children's Services and the state Department of Social Services, Putnam House teaches the young men, ages 16 to 19, personal responsibility and independent living.

As dozens of other teens in the foster care system have done, these five young men will call the triple-decker on Glendale Street home until they are ready to move out. Some stay for several months, while others stay for years.

While the boys remain at Putnam, the Cambridge architecture firm Tsoi/Kobus & Associates wants the house they share to really be a home.

To celebrate its own 25th anniversary, the firm is renovating the Putnam House basement and backyard. The space, which before was dark, dank, and unusable, will be transformed and modernized to include a lounge, music studio, woodworking shop, study space, and laundry room.

The folks at TK&A, along with their community partners including Commodore Builders of Newton and the United Way of Massachusetts, hope their gift to current and future Putnam residents will make at least one foster home a better place to be.

In search of the perfect location for this year's grand-scale community build, project managers toured a number of places before settling on Putnam.

"We felt like they had the greatest need and we could make the greatest difference there," said Katy Tassmer, of TK&A. Putnam was supposed to be a home for the boys, she added, "but there wasn't anything special or necessarily inviting about the house."

"The people from the house came down" to TK&A, said Keisy Marquez, the project architect. "We brainstormed some ideas and came up with a model." Over the course of two weeks, the architects designed two schemes for the space; the residents chose one.

"They came up with a lot of good ideas - great ideas," said 17-year-old Putnam resident Tad. "They're doing everything that we like and that's pretty awesome to me." Tad has lived at Putnam for a year and four months and expects to stay for another five months or so.

When he turns 18, Tad and other youths in DSS care can choose to sign out of state custody, or remain in the system until they turn 22. Massachusetts offers rent and tuition assistance to those who remain in DSS care as long as they stay out of trouble and are productive in school or at work. The question, according to Putnam case manager Wallace Coar, is whether the residents can "pull it together in the time that the state's willing to pay."

These young people have spent their lives moving from place to place, Coar said. "They've all fallen through the cracks at some point . . . then they just lose hope." His goal as a Putnam case manager is to provide stability and help the youth see a future that extends past their short-term stays at various foster homes.

Putnam House is a "saving grace" for many of the young men who come and go, Coar said. "There's more to it than just putting them somewhere," he said. "There's this year and years after. [Putnam] comes with a bigger picture."

A report released by the Boston Foundation in June showed the grim reality that youths face as they leave foster care and enter adulthood. Looking at 96 teenagers who aged out of state custody in 2005, the study found that since going out on their own, 60 percent of them showed signs of depression, 54 percent were unemployed, more than one-third had been homeless for a period of time, and 25 percent had been arrested.

In his 14 years in the foster care system, 17-year-old Putnam resident Jeffrey had lived in 10 different places, including juvenile detention. His advice to anyone growing up in state custody: "Don't get too attached to people. You're gonna be moving around a lot. You're never gonna feel like you're at home. You're always going to be uncomfortable. You're gonna feel like life is never gonna come together. Good luck."

State Representative Gloria Fox of Roxbury grew up in foster care and has served on the Legislative Committee on Foster Care.

"Sometimes I don't know where we get it from but I know that every young person that has to move from foster home to foster home has to bring out their inner strength," Fox said. "That's the way we survive."

While acknowledging the sobering June report, Fox urged people not to forget about the success stories.

Some consider it a "fait accompli," she said, "that you go from DSS to DYS [Department of Youth Services] to DOC [Department of Corrections]." But former foster children who become successful "are living proof that that doesn't have to be the case in spite of what we go through in some of our foster homes."

For now, the youths at Putnam are eager to see their new space in its finished form.

"We're just waiting for it," said 18-year-old Cory, who has lived at Putnam House for eight months now. "We're grateful for it."

The total cost of the renovation is estimated at \$100,000; all materials, labor, and furnishings are being donated. In an effort to build green, designers are using recycled and reclaimed materials.

"Like all community agencies, our resources are stretched," said Denise Maguire, executive director of Cambridge Family & Children's Service. "The idea of a new, comfortable space where the boys can study, pursue creative passions . . . or just hang out is exciting to all of us." ■