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## WestCare offers clients chance for fresh start

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Angie Vente is all smiles as she stands in the kitchen of the WestCare Women's and Children's Campus in her paper hat and matching stark white apron. She's beaming with pride for her job as a cook in the Centennial Hills facility, which she said changed her life.

"I was a 10-year heroin addict," said Vente, 27. "I started at 15, and I was in and out of jail 20-something times."

Vente spent a year and a half in treatment at the campus at 5659 Duncan Drive. When she entered, she had only an eighth-grade education. Now, she has a General Education Development diploma, a car and has been working at the center since exiting the program six months ago.

Vente said she didn't always have a great relationship with her mother, but WestCare has given her the tools to live with her mom, and she said working at the facility means she's there five times a week, which helps.

"This is my second home," Vente said. "I want to work on Christmas and Thanksgiving."

Vente graduated from WestCare's adult women's program, which is one of three programs offered at the facility.

The adult program is for women ages 18 and older. Many clients have children, and WestCare encourages the families to live together at the facility while the mothers are getting treatment.

In addition to counseling for drug abuse, the participants are enrolled in child development classes and their children are given wellness checks and immunizations.

Darlene Terrill, campus director, said the goal is to get the mothers to take their children to an outside daycare, which is what they will have to do once they are living on their own. But, there is a nursery on site for clients who are not ready for the responsibility.

Many children are born to mothers living at the facility, and Terrill said she is proud that they have had over 600 babies born without drug addictions since the campus opened four years ago.

Janaka Childs was pregnant and had an 18-month-old son living with family in California when she entered the program 13 months ago.

"WestCare supported me when I made the decision to have my son come live with me," she said.

Childs now has her 2-year-old son and 7-month-old daughter living with her. She was slowly reunited with her son starting with short visits and growing to weekend-long stays, until he finally moved into the facility about six weeks ago. Childs just got a job and has both her children in daycare. She said the next step is to move out on her own with the children.

"I wouldn't have been able to make healthy strong decisions without WestCare," she said. "Now, I feel good about myself. I'm an empowered woman now."

The campus also has an adolescent treatment program for girls ages 12-17. Some clients are ordered by the court to participate in the program, and others are referred by their families. Adolescents usually spend between four and six months at WestCare, where they participate in weekly family meetings, two to three group meetings a day with other clients, individual meetings with counselors, chores and school. The program is designed to be very structured, and the girls' day usually starts at about 6 a.m. and ends at 9 p.m.

Jennifer Hilton, adolescent services coordinator for the campus, said working with the families is one of the most important parts of the program, because once the girls are clean, they will go back home to live.

"We act as parents they never had or teach their parents how to parent," Hilton said.

Participants earn passes to spend time at home, and they must spend a certain amount of hours at home before they can be released.

Clients are offered three months of after-care services, and Hilton said often times, when clients ask to come back, it's because they are not comfortable with the conditions at home.

The campus also has an emergency shelter which can house up to 15 girls and 20 boys from ages 10-17. This is the only section of the facility that has a male population. WestCare does offer treatment for men, but that facility is located on Mount Charleston.

"To help the girls bond, we take boys out of the equation," Terrill said. "We deal with issues that have to do with just girls. Having just girls gives them the chance to say what they want."

Many of the children are brought to the shelter by police officers because they are either breaking curfew or were found in their homes unsupervised. Others are brought in by their parents because the children are considered unmanageable.

Terrill said bringing kids to WestCare shows that the parents want to help them.

"Parents today just give up on their kids," Terrill said. "WestCare is a positive step."

The clients can stay at the shelter for as little as a few hours or in some cases up to a few months.

"Some kids are here for a long time," said Diane Turner, shelter coordinator. "If Child Haven is looking for placement for them, it can take time."

The shelter staff works with the clients to find out what their problems are. Terrill said, sometimes, something as simple as a curfew case can uncover a larger problem at home.

"Kids come here with a host of problems," Turner said. "We try to find out what's causing that and make

changes."

"These kids are victims," Terrill said. "Victims of families or the streets."

Jazmyn Perez has been a participant in all three WestCare programs. When the courts ordered her to enter at 17, she was brought to the shelter and it was determined that she had a drug addiction. She was enrolled in the adolescent program and decided to leave after only a week.

"I wasn't done living the life I wanted," she said. "I wasn't done loving my ex (boyfriend). I wasn't done getting high."

About five months later, Perez was ordered to reenter treatment if she wanted to get custody of her then nearly 1-year-old son, who was living in foster care.

"After coming here and having real clean time, no alcohol, no mind altering substances, that's when they were able to open my eyes to see I was all my son had."

After two months, Perez started visiting with her son, and when she turned 18, she moved into the adult program. The 19-year-old got her high school diploma, and her son has been living with her since last August.

Perez entered the College of Southern Nevada in January and wants to go to UNLV to study criminal justice.

"WestCare has been the biggest miracle in my life," Perez said. "I never thought I'd be able to have a family and real friends."

The campus has a cafeteria, classrooms, meeting rooms, a health clinic and a nursery.

All clients in the adolescent program and children who are in the shelter for an extended period of time spend most of their day in school. The campus has Clark County School District licensed special education teachers. The students get a lot of personal attention and work on getting caught up so they can reenter local schools. Students in the shelter are encouraged to stay in their home school if possible, and staff will drive students or they will take public buses.

The campus emphasizes art classes as a way for clients to really express themselves and channel their energies.

"These kids don't believe they have artistic qualities, but they go to art class and things start to come out," Turner said.

Students also take exercise, yoga and meditation classes.

There are about 50 staff members for the 100 clients who live at WestCare. There are staff members at the facility 24 hours a day. Directors and coordinators can be reached 24 hours a day, as well.

Clients pay for services on a sliding scale, which depends on what their families can afford. There is federal funding available to assist eligible clients. WestCare accepts financial donations, as well as all types of new and gently used clothing, shoes, baby items, furniture and other items.