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Alvia, left, a resident at the Bridge House residential facility in Davenport with the help of Regen Johnson, of Davenport, a Junior League of the Quad Cities volunteer as they paint on canvas for an "I am" wall display at the Bridge House on Saturday morning.

## Volunteers help renovate Bridge House's comfort room

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DAVENPORT — Cori has been living at Bridge House for almost three months. Convicted of grand theft auto in August, the 17-year-old was court-ordered to the facility after a month in juvenile detention in Des Moines, where she is from.

"I've been in Polk County detention center eight or nine times. It's been a year since my very first charge," she said. "I've been on house

arrest, I've been in drug treatment, I've been to a lot of different places. It's been tiring."

Cori is finally in a place where she can receive counseling, focus on herself and address past behavior. She also can unwind in the newly renovated "comfort room."

The residents of Bridge House in Davenport, a residential facility for at-risk girls on the Annie Wittenmeyer campus, have a beautifully renovated space

to call their own.

After two months of coordination and work, the comfort room was completed Saturday with the help of 48 volunteers from the Junior League of the Quad Cities.

Jennifer Vondracek, the executive director of yoga G and member of the Junior League, had been teaching Trauma Sensitive Yoga to the girls of Bridge House when she came up with the idea for the comfort room.

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## Bridge House: New comfort room filled with sensory items

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"When one of the girls needed a time out, the (former) comfort room wasn't really comforting," she said.

Indeed, the former room is an 8 feet by 8 feet gray cinderblock, windowless cell with a cement floor and a heavy steel door. It feels more like a prison than a comfort room.

Across the hall is the new comfort room. Designed to be calming to the senses, the large, 12 feet by 16 feet space has walls painted a green-gray color called Painted Beach Glass. It resembles a luxurious living room with soft, gray carpeting, two swivel chairs on either side of a large window, and a marble-top table for journaling. Above the table is a framed chalkboard that reads, "keep calm," which echoes the theme of the room.

Junior League volunteers carry supplies and furniture in the room. They all wear sweatshirts with the words, "keep calm and volunteer" on the back.

Rebecca Robinson, former president of the Junior League, spent countless hours scouting for furniture and accessories. The marble-top table used to sit in her kitchen before she married and bought a larger one.

Against one wall, a volunteer fills a cream-colored hutch with baskets of books, puzzles and art supplies. Above the window, another volunteer hangs a rhinestone-accented sign that reads, "laughter sparkles like sunshine."

The room is filled with sensory items, such as a weighted blanket, stress balls and yoga mats. Velcro has been applied underneath wooden chairs, which helps de-stress and

distract from negative thoughts when touched. The potpourri scent of a Glade Plug-In fills the room.

"A comfort room is designed for a child who is easily triggered or frustrated," said Stephanie Hernandez, director of Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Programs for Family Resources. "It helps calm them down so when they're in 'fight or flight' mode, it brings them back down to that base line."

Ms. Hernandez said the room is not meant to be used as a punishment, but as a way of teaching healthy coping skills.

"It's where you feel safe emotionally and physically," she said.

Bridge House can house up to 10 girls. In a few days, it will be at capacity when two more join the group foster care home. The average stay is six to nine months.

"I can't stress enough that these aren't bad kids — they've had bad things done to them," Ms. Hernandez said. "What we focus on is a healing process and building trust and how they can manage their mental health. Their reaction is to past trauma.

"A lot of times the girls feel relief knowing they're not going to be harmed anymore."

Ms. Hernandez said most of the girls at Bridge House have been sexually or physically abused and neglected.

While the volunteers work, the girls take turns making tie-pillows and getting their nails painted. It is the spa portion of the day. Yoga sessions will follow later in the afternoon.

Cori shows off her purple, sparkling nails. She looks forward to returning to Des Moines

in January and eventually graduating from Future Pathways High School. She misses her parents and siblings.

She tells of suffering sexual abuse by her grandfather as a young child and later by two family friends as recent as a year ago. She admits the abuse destroyed her trust of others.

"I feel bad for doing some of the things I've done," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "I think everybody should have that one person they can talk to and keep each other out of trouble."

Alivia, 15, has been living at Bridge House for four months. She was brought to the facility after getting involved in fights. A student of North High School, she admits to having anger issues, but has learned how to use healthy coping skills.

"I was disrespecting myself and others. I was skipping class. I wasn't caring about anything but myself," she said. "Bridge House is a place where you take a few steps back and find your real, true colors. Ms. Stephanie said I've made a lot of progress."

Alivia is scheduled to be released in two weeks. She said she likes the comfort room because it conveys a more positive atmosphere. Her housemate, Cori, agrees.

"I like the new comfort room because it's more homey, it's not like a lock-down room," Cori said. "I think it will help a lot of the girls. Everyone has been looking forward to it."

After months of hard work and planning, Ms. Robinson surveys the completed room and says, "it meets my expectations."