



Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Re: Program – Holly DeWald 524-9457

Family Mediation Program Begins at Youth Services Bureau

LACONIA: Families experiencing discord and conflict may be eligible for mediation services through a new family mediation program now underway at the Youth Services Bureau in Laconia. Designed to assist youths and their parents in resolving their issues of conflict before court involvement becomes necessary, the Belknap County Family Mediation Program will be housed and administered by Youth Services Bureau through a collaborative initiative with the Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families. The Citizens Council is the actual recipient of delinquency prevention grant funds from the US Department of Justice, OJJDP, through the Division for Juvenile Justice Services, N.H. Department of Health and Human Services.

According to Holly DeWald, Youth Services Bureau Executive Director, parent-child mediation is designed to resolve the problem at hand in a confidential and neutral setting while modeling valuable communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills for both parents and youth.

“We see mediation as one way to keep youth out of the court system,” she says, explaining that family mediation is also “very helpful in shortening the path for those youth already court-involved. The bottom line is that family mediation has the potential for reducing tax-payer burden around juvenile crime.”

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According to DeWald, a committed group of volunteer mediators, “now numbering close to a dozen and each with many hours of intensive training”, are now prepared to provide mediation services to area youth and their families. She says that the mediators, who work in pairs, meet with Belknap County youth and their parents and help them “name the problem and then develop a solution” that is beneficial and acceptable to everyone involved. The solution becomes a contract that the mediators and family members sign.

“The mediators don’t find the answers; the families do that - but the mediators guide the process.”

DeWald explains that the Family Mediation Program will grow in carefully planned stages. Now and throughout the summer, the first referrals will be youth who are either currently court-involved and in danger of further escalation into the juvenile justice system, or youth who are at risk of becoming court involved through C.H.I.N.S. petitions because of truancy issues.

“This will require a close working relationship with both the Juvenile Probation and Parole office and the schools,” she notes.

Later in the fall, referrals will come from a variety of other sources including agencies, the faith community, and parents and youths themselves.

Linda Ferruolo, M Ed, a certified marital mediator and an adjunct faculty member at Plymouth State College, will provide mediator training and support. Ms. Ferruolo who assisted in the design of the Belknap County Family Mediation Program will “play an active role as this new program unfolds,” adds DeWald.

DeWald also acknowledges the Belknap County Citizen’s Council on Children and Families who “helped us identify and pull together the resources to develop this program. We wrote the grant together, proving that one and one can really add up to three!”

As the actual grant recipient, the Citizens Council will continue to partner with the Youth Services Bureau with program evaluation and public relations, “just another example of how the Council can help expand the reach of programs and services for Belknap County children and families,” she adds.

The Belknap County Family Mediation Program is part of the growing continuum of options for youth in the county who are having difficulty with what is considered socially acceptable, responsible behavior. Also included in this continuum is court diversion, provided by both the Youth Services Bureau and the Youth Assistance Program in Tilton; Upswing (CHINS diversion), provided by Youth Services Bureau; Belknap County Restorative Justice and J.O.L.T. Programs, provided by the Belknap County Sheriffs Department; the FamilyStrength S.T.A.R.T. Program, the Juvenile Drug Court Program, administered by Laconia District Court, and numerous foster and residential placements.

Managers and coordinators of these programs and other components in the County’s system of juvenile justice meet together monthly with members and staff of the Citizens Council to discuss how to better coordinate services and share resources. Called the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, “this interaction, sharing of ideas, blending of leadership, and management of priorities is what builds an improved environment for children and families in Belknap County,” says Ms. DeWald.

For further information about the Family Mediation Program or other programs for youth, one may contact the Youth Services Bureau at 524-9457.