

## The Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families: A Sower of Seeds

It was mid-day Tuesday, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2002, and fat flakes began floating from a cheerless gray sky, the silent beginning of one of those un-announced snowstorms. By late afternoon the snow was sticking to automobiles and greasing the highways. Yet the bland weather reports encouraged planners to continue with the evening’s event in Meredith, the inauguration of the Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families, the County’s newest department.

More than 100 interested people drove through the snowy darkness to watch their friends and neighbors, 21 citizens from throughout Belknap County, become a part of Belknap County history. Together the new Council members recited a promise of responsibility crafted by the County Commissioners and Special Justice Willard Martin, the acknowledged father of this new County endeavor.

These Charter Members took on a rather large task that evening. They agreed to make a difference in the lives of children and families in Belknap County by fashioning improvements in the County’s fragmented system of juvenile justice, by encouraging others to volunteer their time and talents in their communities, and by promoting the principles of “Community Justice” throughout the County.

Community Justice is a relatively new set of ideas that molds an environment friendly and supportive of families and one that allows them to live safely with dignity and respect. It is best

explained as the center of three overlapping circles.

Known as a Venn Diagram and now the Council’s logo, each circle represents an area of emphasis. The first circle is “strengths-oriented community development”; the second represents “prevention strategies”; and the third, “Balanced and Restorative justice”, a concept that prioritizes the needs of victims and the safety of the community along with the management of the offender. Implicit in the Community Justice approach is the intent to use existing resources in the community and county in a creative and overlapping manner, rather than automatically raiding the purses of taxpayers.

*So you may ask, what is the difference now, some two years after that snowy January evening?*

In this case, success is not measured by spectacular projects that grab media headlines and heap praise on the Council. Success comes by quietly sowing seeds in both fertile and unfertile soil, sharing the best seeds with others, nourishing the soil that everyone uses, and then caring for the tender growth that appears. Twenty-one Council members cannot do this alone. Rather, it happens by cultivating relationships and building partnerships with many others.



The path to safe and resourceful communities is long, steep, and often messy with many intentional and unintentional detours. In spite of knowing that it will be a long journey; the Citizens Council is on its way.

New as it is, the Citizens Council has already sown some important seeds during these past two years. Some have taken root. Consider that the principles of Community Justice, energetically planted by the Council, are now beginning to emerge in community conversations. Or that now, the right people are talking and working together, making possible some preliminary changes in the juvenile justice system. Or that the Council played a role in convening residents to talk about how to improve their stressed neighborhood. And that a number of new task groups, coordinated by Council resources, are working and talking together about the challenges that face children and families in this County.

Just recently, the Council, in partnership



**Steven Bingler of Concordia Associates enjoys a light moment during his presentation in the Lakes Region.**

with the Center for Civic Engagement, the

UNH Cooperative Extension, and the Lakes Region Charitable Foundation, brought two nationally recognized architectural planners, Steven Bingler and Bobbie Hill, to talk with close to 150 community leaders about the creative use of community facilities. Conserving resources is an important component of “strength-based” community development.

The County Commissioners support “Community Justice” as an approach for improving the County’s system of juvenile justice. One goal is to look closely at the practice of sending troubled youths out of the County for rehabilitation. The answer, caring for youth right here in our own communities rather than sending them away to an environment they do not know, seems to flow right out of the Community Justice model. Youths who attend school in a familiar setting can start to create networks that will be present to help them transition back into their communities.

As a result of early seeds sown by the Citizens Council and its many partners, some hopeful trends are already underway. Belknap County has dramatically cut the numbers of youths sent to the Youth Detention Center (YDC) in Manchester. At one point in the last two years, the enrollment of Belknap County youths at YDC was as high as fourteen. The costs of keeping youths in placement is legions higher than the costs of educating them in their own school districts, even with the extra support they may need. Today, because of the

concerted effort of many, there are no youths from this County at YDC. Admittedly, this



**Belknap County Sheriff Dan Collis (R) and Lt. Rick Batstone meet monthly with other juvenile justice professionals and lay citizens to discuss juvenile justice issues and to plan for improved outcomes.**

figure is only one small piece of a very complex puzzle, but it does illustrate how people working as a team on a shared goal can bring stunning change.

Further examples of sowing seeds include the Sanborn Park project. The Citizens Council was, and still is an active partner in this Lakeport initiative, playing several roles: first as a formal convener and participant in the initial discussions, then as a facilitator of the first large meeting, and now as a coach and mentor to the leadership that has emerged.

Sowing seeds continues on a daily basis through the purposeful dialogue and teamwork now underway in a number of issue-related workgroups coordinated by Council resources. The responsibility and time involved in managing these committees is immense, but because the Council views open dialogue as the premier

tool of change, it willingly assumes this key leadership role wherever appropriate. Coordinated by Council resources, lay citizens regularly meet with professionals in teams, task forces, committees, sub-committees, and ad-hoc cross-team groups around such themes as substance abuse, parenting, data collection, child abuse and neglect, mentoring, alternatives to detention, civic engagement, community-specific topics, and systemic communication, all topics that directly affect children and families and the various components of the County's juvenile justice system.

The Council acknowledges its unusual combination of resources that include financial support by the Annette P Schmitt Foundation with the mandate to make a difference in the lives of children and families. But in spite of these grant funds, used to support the Council during its first two years, nothing could, or would have happened without its numerous partners and collaborators.

In other words, the Council may till the soil and sow the seeds, but many are responsible for tending the garden. And many more will take home the blue ribbons honoring the fruits of the harvest.

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