

A Letter to Supporters-Children with Incarcerated Parents: One Year Later

This month marks a year since we hosted "Brighter Futures: A Symposium About the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents." We're sending this out to those of you who participated as well as others who have expressed interest.

As the Rev. Dr. Wilson W. Goode indicated in his workshop that day, "We must decide what part we can accomplish; concentrate on doing that portion....and doing it well." Here at BBBS our part is mentoring. We have been busy interviewing and matching children who were referred as a result of the symposium...Thank you for those referrals! We have been able to match over 150 area children who have parents locked away from them with caring adult mentors. That number is barely the tip of the iceberg.

Hearing from those who attended the Symposium, it's safe to say the topic and the kids are on our radar. While some actions have been initiated, much more needs to be accomplished. Following is what we at BBBS are aware has occurred (please let me know what I've missed!) Then, a list of some of what the symposium participants hoped would happen. We're only a very small part of the way there. Part of the frustration expressed is the sheer magnitude of the numbers of kids affected by a loved one's incarceration.

Activities initiated in the Greater Harrisburg Area over the past year specific to this population of children include:

- Harrisburg School District's implementation of training to Guidance counselors and staff re: pertinent issues of concern
- Development of a group counseling effort for identified children (partners Harrisburg School District, Shippensburg University and BBBS)
- Harrisburg City Police Dep't has made School based mentoring an option for their detectives
- Harrisburg School District has held community forums for parents and providers through the summer
- Numerous Faith Based Initiatives and Parents Groups have reached out to parents and caretakers
- Harrisburg School District has implemented a targeted outreach to students with incarcerated parents to provide needed services for school year 09-10.
- Counselors at at least one CD School are exploring ways to provide in-school counseling to the children involved

Some of the additional Activities we had recognized as needs as a result of the Symposium include:

- Empowering the children to learn how to get services for themselves with out having to repeatedly share their personal circumstances
- Development of a liaison group whose members could be called upon to go with police at time of arrest to help with children's needs; (a neutral "ombudsman")
- A mechanism for communication among arresting officers and schools that could help facilitate support services, minimize next day additional trauma for the kids.
- Develop consistent time of arrest procedures that can be as child friendly as possible
- Develop trust between the caretakers and agencies that can provide support services
- Keep communication with the incarcerated parent current to help the child/parent bond
- Recognize the Children's Bill of Rights as something we all should incorporate into ongoing practices. (<http://www.sfcipp.org/>)

Our community has made some steps -- but there are leaps and bounds needed. We send this reminder because, as we have been told and proudly take responsibility for, we started this conversation. We are glad to have done so...but where do we all go from here? Harrisburg School District is to be commended for the numerous efforts they have made on behalf of the kids; indeed, some of the suggestions about communication, empowering and supporting are in process. Additionally,....

- Is there an entity out there that could help with the development of some more of the suggestions?
- Could we find a group of people to be available "on call" to go with police on arrests where it is known children will be home?
- How could we develop a mechanism to communicate more openly on the children's behalf...and then also convince caretakers that it actually is in the child's best interest?
- How can we attend to the needs of the kids in a more comprehensive manner?
- How can we empower the children to advocate for themselves?

Please look at the action steps in the Brighter Futures data and determine how you or your entity could play a part.

There needs to be an organizing entity. We at BBBS will surely be a part, but must concentrate on recruiting adult mentors to pair with the children to enhance their chances of success. You are receiving this because you have expressed interest. Now what?

Please share this info with other interested parties. We are very interested in hearing from you!