

PRODUCING A WHOLE, HEALTHY KID

THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE August 27, 2005 Page: 4A

Byline: DAWN MILLER

The problem with my job, Linda Watts confided this week, is that no one understands what I do. She is right. Watts runs the Mountain State Family Alliance, a grant-funded effort to help families in the state's 11 most southwestern counties, including Kanawha.

Watts helps parents who are stressed by their child's or their own mental illness, disability, abuse or neglect, sometimes at the same time as poverty, job loss and lack of education, sometimes despite having jobs and education.

But what can anyone do about it?

Since 1999, the alliance has offered respite care to families to give parents a break from their special and high-need youth. They have offered instruction to parents to make them more effective. They have taught parents how to navigate the complex worlds of special education and Medicaid. With the help of grants from the federal government and from the state Department of Health and Human Resources, they have offered help to parents and their needy children beyond what is authorized under Medicaid or what usual DHHR workers have been able to give.

Medicaid is for medical problems and treats only the child. The alliance is able to add social, emotional and educational needs and can consider the whole family.

It sounds grim, vague and difficult to quantify, yet the people involved in this effort took a couple of hours this week to revel in their successes, to pat each other on the back, pose for pictures and count up their accomplishments.

They handed out 20 "Rainy Day Hero" awards. One of them went to my boss, Gazette Editor Jim Haight, or "Papa Jim" to the grandchildren who nominated him. He and his wife Nancy have cared for more than 40 foster children over the years. He takes the children on weekend outings and always makes sure they learn something new about the world when

they are with him, his nomination said.

Another went to Steve Horner of the Treasures store at the Kanawha Mall. He runs Yu-gi-Oh! tournaments, volunteers to give children something to do to keep them out of trouble, furnishes tables and judges for the events and makes sure they play fairly.

Another went to Tony Lawhon, a Hurricane police officer. The parent who nominated him said that Officer Lawhon "talked to my son like a human being and put him on 'Tony Parole' to provide me some reinforcement for me when it was needed."

The other winners are Cindy Bryant of Mountain State Family Alliance; Suzanne Celdran and Tammy King, nurse practitioners for the Saxe medical office in Barboursville; Lisa Clark of Cross Lanes; Maj. Paul Clark and Sgt. Robert Sparks of Huntington High School's Junior ROTC; Sharon Deusenbury of Cross Lanes; Ashley Nicole Haynes of KVC; Robin Hughes of Barboursville; Linda Leasure of West Virginia Advocates; Bill Locke of Hurricane; Jason Pettaway of Huntington; Dr. James Phifer of Radical Rehab in Huntington; David and Marsha Rice of Barboursville; Jennifer Santmyer of Nitro; Danis Soyu of Braley & Thompson and Kevin Walker, a respite worker in Kanawha County.

The details vary, but each one was recognized for spending time with a child in difficult circumstances, for helping a family finally crack their puzzling problems, for getting help for abused and neglected children, for keeping children from going to institutions unnecessarily, for helping parents at the end of their rope.

Those individual stories amount to these kinds of results:

- Between October 1999 and July 2005, at least 309 children and teens were prevented from having to leave home or going out of state to live-in treatment centers.

- Between 2001 and 2004, the number of kids being sent out of state was cut in half.

- After one year, 76.1 percent of caregivers involved reported that their child was able to remain in one place, compared to 50 percent the year before. Moving children around too often is a problem. More than 90 percent in an "intensive care" program remained with the same caregiver after one year.

- Unexcused school absences were cut by 80 percent, and school suspensions were cut by 92 percent.

- 86 percent of families reported that their families functioned better after one year.

It's difficult to picture exactly what Linda Watts' staff does because it varies with each family. One kid is saved from a costly and damaging stay at an institution. Another kid gets an education plan for the first time when he returns from an institution. A foster care couple gets a day off from the very stressful abused child they are keeping. After a year, families require little or no help because they have learned what they need to know to take care of their own families.

"We strengthen the work that everyone at the Department of Health and Human Resources is trying to accomplish," Watts said.

The state now has a choice. The Mountain State Family Alliance will come to the end of its grant-funded life at the end of August 2006. The next question is whether the state wants to keep up this effort and replicate it in other regions.

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WSAZ 5:30 Edition “Cover Story” March 31, 2005

(4 minutes, 34 seconds running time)

Co-Anchor/Cover Story Reporter Penny Moss:
Hello and welcome to your 5:30 Edition. I’m Penny Moss in Charleston.

Co-Anchor Bill Murray: And I’m Bill Murray in Huntington. Lawmakers in West Virginia are heading into the home stretch, but work on one of their biggest challenges hasn’t even really started...

Moss: That is, hammering out next year’s state budget. A lot of agencies, organizations and departments are jockeying for their little morsel of a \$3.26 billion pie. One of those programs is one that doesn’t get a lot of attention, but has quietly worked with children and their families for six years, saving millions of dollars in what’s often out-of-state health care...

In tonight’s Cover Story, a look at the Mountain State Family Alliance--a group that helps children with severe emotional and behavioral problems--that will run out of the federal money that’s been keeping the program going just five months from now.

(Video: Chris Gibson going down slide at Coonskin Park playground)

Life’s been quite a ride for Chris Gibson, and it’s not all been this fun. He’s friendly, inquisitive and bright, but there’s also a much darker side to his personality...

Chris: I don’t wanna, you know, get mad to the point that...(gestures) “leave me alone” (makes fists and noise to indicate anger)...

Regina Gibson: It made him feel good to have other people hurt like him.

Moss: His problems were so bad he was sent to an out-of-state treatment facility for almost a year. His mother says he came back even worse than when he left, and the ordeal scarred her as well.

Regina: I only got to see him five times in that eleven months. I got to talk to him on the phone, I got to email him, but it’s not the same as having him run



up and jump in my arms.

Moss: Aside from the emotional toll, consider this: it can cost upwards of \$300 a day for that kind of treatment facility. It’s a system that doesn’t make sense to Jeanette Rowsey.

MSFA’s Rowsey: Nobody is communicating with each other in the traditional system, so what happens is that kids fall through the gaps. And when that happens, traditionally and in other parts of the state as we know, the state spends tens of millions of dollars ordering children to residential facilities, psychiatric hospitals, and most of those are out of state.

Moss: Rowsey works with an organization whose

main goal is to change that. The Mountain State Family Alliance basically gets the doctors, therapists, school, parents and everyone else involved all on the same page, to keep kids, and treat kids, at home.

(Sound of Chris describing things he likes to do)

Moss: Chris has worked with the alliance for two and a half years, and his mother says he’s a different child.

Chris: I think they help me a lot.

Moss: For the last six years, federal money has kept the Mountain State Family Alliance going, but that money runs out September 1st. Rowsey is hopeful the state department of health and human services will pick up the tab and ultimately save the state millions.

Rowsey: We’re hoping that this model—that the state will look at this model and see that it makes financial sense as well as sense for the families.

Regina: I was told by one of the therapists in the Pines in Virginia that he was placed in, that my son would be institutionalized for the rest of his life. With his enthusiasm to learn, being able to do any job he wants to--You know, he has that potential. We just have to find the tools to help him get there.

Moss (to Chris): What’s your plan?

Chris: I think I want to be a news forecaster like you.

Moss (live on set): More power to him! I bet you he’s going to accomplish a lot in his life...

The Mountain State Family Alliance has a budget of \$1.5 million a year. But without the help it provides in keeping children at home, Rowsey says, more children will be placed into out of state facilities at an estimated cost of more than \$11 million a year. So you can see the difference.

In the last six years the alliance has helped more than 1,000 families. The group is now just anxiously waiting to see if the state will continue to fund it. The budget the Governor submitted to lawmakers did not include funding for it.

OUT OF STATE, OUT OF SIGHT: BILLS SEEK TO KEEP TROUBLED KIDS AT HOME

THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE March 25, 2005 Page: 1C (Excerpt)



Byline: SCOTT FINN
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HURRICANE - Almost two years after his stay at an out-of-state psychiatric facility, 13-year-old Logan Locke still is scared he might be sent back. Logan was hard to deal with before he went to the Pennsylvania facility, according to his mom, Susie

Locke. But when he returned, he seemed worse.

He refused to take his clothes off, brush his teeth or take a shower. He tried to open the door of their moving car. He acted out violently with his relatives, she said.

"He began hitting me, took a baseball bat to my dad, slapped his grandmother," she said. "He never had acted that badly before. We had to show Logan how to love life again."

Children like Logan are often sent to out-of-state mental facilities by judges who believe there is no better option for them close to home. But some social workers argue that the children often return home worse than when they left.

For at least 20 years, state officials have promised to "bring our kids home," but about the same number of children, 400, are living in out-of-state facilities today as during the Underwood administration.

Two bills now before the state Legislature seek to keep children like Logan from being sent away from home.

One bill (SB 200, HB 2334) would stop judges from sending children out-of-state unless they receive written approval from the state Secretary of Health and Human Resources. It has passed the House Judiciary Committee but has not been taken up in House Finance. It looks unlikely to pass because of opposition from some judges, who say it takes away their authority to look after the best interest of the child.

Another bill (SB 241, HB 2397) would expand statewide a successful model for keeping kids with their families and out of psychiatric facilities. It would require social workers, educators and court officers to work together create a "system of care" in their community.

But that bill has no funding attached to it. And the model program the bill seeks to copy in the Charleston-Huntington region runs out of federal funding in August.

The Region II System of Care, a program of Mountain State Family Alliance, has cut the number of kids being sent out-of-state by more than half, from 81 in September 1997 to just 37 last month.

The program saved taxpayers at least \$7 million last year by keeping children out of expensive psychiatric facilities. It would cost \$1.5 million to continue, but Gov. Manchin's budget currently includes no money to continue the program.

A chance in life

At 13, Logan now goes to school at Hurricane Middle part of the day, trades Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, and plays with neighborhood children.

But without the help of the Mountain State Family Alliance, Susie Locke is convinced Logan would be in some institution today.

"God forbid, he'd probably be in a center for boys, and he never would have had a chance in life," she said.

Three years ago, Locke struggled to deal with her son's behavioral problems. The stress on the single mom was intense.

Much later, he was diagnosed with autism, a brain disorder that can make it difficult to interact with others. But at the time, no one knew exactly what was wrong.

Locke became severely depressed and had to be hospitalized. Her elderly parents tried to take care of Logan.

But he was a handful, she said. His grandparents approached the state Department of Health and Human

Resources for help. Logan was placed in a mental hospital, then a shelter for children. Then he was kicked out of the shelter for not doing what he was supposed to do.

"He has trouble with accepting authority, he can really try your patience," Locke said. "At the time, he was uncontrollable."

So Logan's grandparents allowed him to be sent to a facility for boys five hours away. Locke and her parents could only visit once every two weeks.

A year later, the staff there said Logan was better and sent him home. But Locke said he was even more out of control.

Luckily for her, she lived in an area served by the new pilot program run by the Mountain State Family Alliance. They set Logan up with a mentor/therapist who spent countless hours with him. For example, he took him to the mall so he could work on talking to others, or to the library to work on computers.

His mentor also introduced Logan to Yu-Gi-Oh! tournaments at the Kanawha Mall, now one of his biggest passions. The trading cards also became a way to reward Logan for good behavior, a system his mother and her boyfriend, Ken Cash, have adopted today.

The program has provided intensive therapy for Logan, and help for Locke with understanding his behavior and dealing with him. Since he's been in the program, he hasn't needed any other state intervention - which is better for him and for taxpayers.

Locke wants to see lawmakers fund the Mountain State Family Alliance. And she thinks they should pass the bill to limit out-of-state placements. "These kids need to be with their families," she said. "They need to treat the child in the community. They are going to come home sometime, and then all hell will break loose." ...

FAMILY A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE February 19, 2005 Page: 4A

Byline: DAWN MILLER

A woman walked up to me this week and squeezed the breath out of me. When she let go, she said I was the reason her family is still a family.

Whoa.

For the record, all I did was write a story about the agonizing choice Robin Hughes faced in 2002. Her teenage son Charlie was in and out of psychiatric hospitals because his behavior was so threatening and erratic. When he improved, Medicaid would no longer pay the bill, and he was sent home. But experience taught Robin that he was not OK to come home without help. Shortly after he returned home, his behavior would change again. She was fearful for herself and her other children. The choice she was offered was to give up custody of her son to the state in order to get the treatment he needed.

Not only did Robin recoil from the very idea, she kept telling people that her son's ADHD diagnosis might be wrong. She was pretty confident in the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. But she suspected that he also had brain damage. When he was 3, he took a liquid anti-seizure medicine that tasted so good, he got up in the middle of the night and drank it like juice. The little toddler went into a coma. Doctors told her it was a wonder he survived. They warned her that he might have suffered brain damage.

As Charlie reached adolescence and his behavior become more and more problematic, Robin had a terrible time getting the kind of evaluation that might settle the question of brain damage and unlock not only appropriate treatment, but also funding. As long as Charlie's diagnoses were behavioral, he was eligible for certain programs funded by certain streams of money. If he had a medical diagnosis, he would be eligible



for other kinds of help.

After the story appeared, various professionals helped Robin to work out Charlie's options. It was as if when the professionals could see many aspects of his life all at the same time, solutions started to emerge. Charlie did eventually leave home for two out-of-state placements, where Robin said he was sexually abused. He has that to deal with now, also. But eventually, he got the evaluation he needed. A doctor concluded that Charlie had suffered frontal lobe brain damage. He began getting help to learn to do things that he could master. They straightened out his medicine. Robin moved from the Upper Kanawha Valley to Barboursville to be closer to the program and doctors who could help him. She spent Christmas with all four of her children for the first time in three years. She takes Charlie to the movies and he can sit through an entire film and enjoy it. She can take him shopping for short periods. One of her other children remarked that he likes to visit Charlie now. She believes that her younger daughter, relieved at Charlie's improved circumstances, was able to blossom, as well.

Of course, Robin is the one who held her family together. She's the one who kept pushing back when professionals - with good intentions and at the end of their own options - pushed her to give up her son to get treatment. She was the one who kept insisting that there was something else wrong when people attributed his behavior to ADHD. I am glad to have been a little paving stone in her road.

I've written many times about West Virginia's costly and damaging habit of sending its children out of sight and out of mind. Charlie was one of the 3,000 young people living in out of state treatment centers on any given day. Robin said that when Charlie was away she and staff at Mountain State Family Alliance, Braley & Thompson and West Virginia Advocates worked every day on a way to bring him home. Once here, with the right doctors and the right diagnoses, his life started to improve.

Martha Walker, new secretary of the state

Department of Health and Human Resources, said this week she wants to hear about solutions, not problems. It's good she has such a practical, constructive attitude because the challenge for her and the new governor is to smooth out the bumpy road that prevents professionals from helping families like Robin's sooner.

Robin had trouble getting help until her son was dangerous, and then everyone's attention had to be on controlling the danger, not on figuring out what was best for Charlie's long-term health and development. As DHHR workers know all too well, their best bet is sometimes to pick a diagnosis that they know will qualify under a certain program and a certain stream of money. It might actually be helpful, or it might just buy some time for a family until something else comes along, or it might add to the child's problems. People who are "treated" for problems they don't really have tend to develop symptoms of those problems. And I've lost count of the number of parents who have called to tell that their children have been sexually abused while in some placement or other, usually, though not always, out of state. If the new secretary can figure out how to make the child and family's situation drive the treatment, instead of the other way around, she will save so many families.

At 19, Charlie still has brain damage. He paces badly. He mutters to himself. But the unpredictable and violent behavior that made him dangerous to live with rarely surfaces. When it does, it's not aimed at others. He still self-mutilates if he gets a chance, but Robin is hopeful that that behavior will gradually lessen, as well. He goes to the Y to swim and play. He goes to church - that's his choice, she said. He may become more competent at shopping or handling other tasks on his own. They don't know yet how far he is able to go. Robin got a job helping other families like hers.

I have on my desk a picture of Charlie. He's hugging one of the professionals who has made such a difference in his life. They're at a picnic. They're smiling and they look happy. And so does Robin. !