

Dealing With Delinquency



BY TOMMY NEWTON

AS A CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST, RESEARCHER, YOUTH ADVOCATE, AND MOTHER, KATRINA PHELPS IS WELL AWARE THAT TEACHING CHILDREN TO MAKE CHOICES THAT ARE HEALTHY AND SAFE IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR FUTURE. BUT THAT IS A DIFFICULT TASK WHEN CHILDREN GROW UP IN ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT DELINQUENT OR CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR.

A number of recent statistics suggest we have reason to be concerned:

- ✗ Warren County has the fourth highest juvenile delinquency rate in Kentucky;
- ✗ Warren County's poverty rate in 1990 was 17.5 percent and the county's per capita income was significantly below the national average;

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- ✗ more than 1,000 students were suspended during the 2000-01 school year for policy violations or criminal acts; and
- ✗ a significant number of students scored below the proficient level in reading, science, math, and writing on state exams.

However, through the federally funded Western Kentucky University Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Project, Dr. Phelps and others in Bowling Green and Warren

County aim to change those statistics and brighten the future for our youth and our community.

"The overall goal is to improve the quality of life and decrease delinquent activities among youth in the region," Dr. Phelps said.

Western received \$500,000 from the U.S. Department of Justice for the ambitious program that uses the resources of the University, the Housing Authority of Bowling Green, the Warren County school system, the Warren County Fiscal Court, and other government and community service agencies.

"Having healthy young people is good for everyone," Dr. Phelps said. "It's not just a parent problem. You can have no children in your household and still have graffiti on your house. Juvenile delinquency can become your

problem whether or not you have kids. It's not just the schools' problem, and it's not just the police department's problem. It's everybody's issue, and everybody needs to work to make this a great place for young people to flourish and find opportunities to succeed."

She's quick to point out that numerous agencies and groups are working together to improve the community. "This is not my brainchild. There have been many people over the course of the last few years coming together to say this is what we need."

Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Project Goals

GOAL 1

Improve academic success by providing an alternative suspension program for students suspended from Warren County schools. WKU and the school system will collaborate to establish an Alternative Suspension Program that will provide academic and counseling services to suspended students. In the past, suspended students have missed instructional time and have faced increased risk for engaging in criminal acts due to unsupervised time at home.

Objectives:

- Reduce the number of repeat suspensions
- Improve school attendance
- Boost academic achievement

GOAL 2

Enhance after-school programs offered by the Housing Authority of Bowling Green by providing supervised, structured after-school activities for students. "Giving young people productive ways to spend their time may significantly decrease the criminal and delinquent activity among juveniles during the late afternoon/early evening time period." — Dr. Katrina Phelps

Objectives:

- Improve school attendance
- Boost academic achievement while reducing student misconduct.

GOAL 3

Establish a centralized information and referral center for the community's health and human service agencies. A 2001 survey by United Way of Southern Kentucky found that the region had no central clearinghouse for human services information and both clients and service providers felt the need for a central point of contact.

A Local Information and Volunteer Exchange Center (ALIVE) will open at 1818 U.S. 31-W Bypass to meet the community need. The center will create a database of human service organizations in the county, establish a community information hotline, connect families with services to meet their needs, create online access to local resources, and match volunteers with service opportunities.

The Center hopes to encourage youth to volunteer their time. A lack of service opportunities for young people was among the "not so good news" revealed in a 2000 Spotlight Youth survey of 1,032 Bowling Green/Warren County students. The survey assessed the attitudes, behaviors, and assets of young people in our community. In a sense, the results of the survey are a report card to indicate how well young people perceive the adults around them are meeting their needs.

The survey's good news included: 74 percent are part of a religious community; 71 percent claim to tell the truth; 70 percent feel their family provides love and support; 70 percent are optimistic about their futures; 68 percent accept and take personal responsibility; 68 percent are motivated to do well in school; 61 percent have positive peer influence; and 60 percent feel safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

The not so good news included: Only 25 percent of youth believe the community values them; 29 percent believe they are given opportunities to contribute to their community; 30 percent see their parents or other adults as positive role models; 63 percent spend less than one hour per week reading for pleasure; and 58 percent spend no time outside of school in fine arts activities.

"This survey gives us a real local sense of what to do," Dr. Phelps said. "If we know that some things are going well for youth and some things aren't, we can start focusing on this idea that children in our area do not feel that this community values them or gives them opportunities to serve as resources. One of the goals of the community information and volunteer center is to develop service learning projects and volunteer opportunities for young people."

Western faculty, staff, and students also will benefit from the program by participating in hands-on activities, by volunteering for community service projects, and by connecting with the community.

"I teach child psychology, so I have always had an interest in how children grow, including the factors that help them to grow to be healthy and make good decisions and the factors that put them at risk," said Dr. Phelps, who works with the Spotlight Youth coalition, serves on the Board of Kentucky Child Now! and is chair-elect of the Warren County Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Council.

She's also interested in building bridges between Western and its service region. "I think there is support from the president and the provost for finding ways to connect with social service agencies and help to link services. We have a responsibility to use our expertise to work in a broader context," she said.

"I think one of the most exciting things about this grant is that Western has a chance to serve in the capacity of providing a program that will benefit the entire community," Dr. Phelps said. "This is not the type of research that will get written in a journal and that possibly the experts will know about. The ALIVE Center is a place that anyone and everyone in our community will know about. It has the potential to be very broad reaching in terms of influencing people in need."

The Western Kentucky University Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Project fits WKU's "Challenging the Spirit" strategic goal of "Enhance Responsiveness to Constituents," she said. "I think projects like these put our money where our mouth is. We're not just talking the talk. We're walking the walk, and working to make Bowling Green a better place to live."

