



One Tough Job

Board lets parents know they're not alone

(Editor's note: This is the last in a series of five stories regarding National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the services available in McKean County to help parents through what the McKean County Collaborative Board calls "the toughest job you'll love" — parenthood. Five protective factors have been identified to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. This series identifies and explores those factors.)

By **MARCIE SCHELLHAMMER**
Era Reporter

Parenting is one tough job, and the McKean County Collaborative Board wants parents to know they are not in it alone.

Support groups, meetings and workshops are available from various agencies, and the McKean County Resource Directory is available online to help parents find they are looking for.

Tina Martin, director of CARE for Children and co-chair of the Collaborative Board, described some of

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Parents

the programs available through CARE.

"There was this overwhelming need for parents to get together to talk about their children," she said, "and really this support program focuses on children with special healthcare needs, and behavioral needs.

"The meetings serve a purpose — a forum for parents to share information," Martin said.

"It's incredible the amount of isolation our parents feel, especially having kids that have a lot of challenges," she said. "Any parent faces challenges, but that population, I think there are so many additional challenges when they are growing up ... developmentally, facing the school system. So to be together, and talk about that and have the experience of parents who have older children is invaluable."

"It's a place to just be yourself," said Sherry Rodgers, a parent who takes advantage of the services offered through the Collaborative Board. "If you have to cry, nobody's going to make light of you. It's a serious situation and everybody knows it. And they accept you for who you are."

Referring to the Resource Directory, Lee Sizemore, director of the Family Centers, explained, "It gives them a first place to call. Parents sometimes do have to chat with other parents to find 'hidden' resources."

"It's time to break the stigma," said MaryAnne Polucci-Sherman, psychologist with Bradford Recovery Systems. "When you need something, open up and say you need it."

Rodgers added that asking for help isn't a negative at all — "You're not weak, you're smart. It's lonely before you get to that step."

"It's hard to find (the services)," said Sylvana Reed, another parent who uses the services offered through the Collaborative Board. "I was a single mom, a teenage mom, and I had to go to Pittsburgh to get my daughter diagnosed."

"We need to get the word out," Sizemore said, adding that the geography of the area makes it difficult.

"When things aren't going right, parents get frustrated and that's when things can go off track," Rodgers said. "You're not ready to go seek that help."

"Word of mouth is about the best thing we have," said Greta Billings, co-chair of the Collaborative Board. "It's a hard thing to break through."

Referring to people's attitudes on getting help, Billings recounted, "I'm living life. I don't have time to think if there is something out there that can help me."

Martin said the important part is to educate the staff of each agency about all the services available in the county.

"We're constantly training each other in our services," Sizemore said. "One strategy is getting agencies aware of what other agencies do."

Reed also addressed a frequent problem in rural areas — lack of specialist care for children with special needs. She's traveled to Pittsburgh and West Virginia to find care for two of her children.

"If I hadn't been the parent to make that 4-hour trip, we would be the ones sitting in the corner with our kids screaming and crying," Reed said, explaining the toll it takes on a parent is heavy.

"When a hospital won't accept your insurance, that's disabling to a family," Rodgers said, explaining she travels to Olean, N.Y., for the children whose insurance isn't accepted locally.

"That's across the board with insurance issues and then we wonder why people ignore medical issues," Billings said, adding "because it's a pain in the butt to deal with them."

"Through CARE, we have a special assistance fund for gas for any child that receives any of our services if it's a medical trip," Martin said, explaining there is somewhere to turn for help. "We cap it eventually. For the most part, the people who come really need it."

seen him in two months and has this condition, what can do?" said Duane Wolfe, director of CYS.

"We've had times where we've taken them down (Pittsburgh) ourselves or know where to refer them," said. "We'll set up a transportation request. We can help you save us in the long run.

"I'd pay for a hundred trip to Pittsburgh rather than putting a kid in some foster home or placement," he said, explaining the agency can help to solve a problem causing a crisis in a family.

Another agency that can help is one whose perception in the community might otherwise scare people away — Children and Youth Services.

"We get those calls that say 'we need to take him to see a specialist,' or from the other end of the spectrum, 'we have