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Organization seeks to reduce high-risk youth behavior

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Christina Macone-Greene

Special to the Valley News

Friday, April 25th, 2008.
Issue 17, Volume 12.

Local News

Image Gallery



Courtesy photo.

Anthony, Ashley and Jessica Pardo enjoy a day of fishing with their mother, Dawn (back, center), and Christian Mentors' Cathy Bates (back, left) and Betty Arroyo.

Birth Choice of Temecula, a nonprofit pregnancy resource center and ministry, is adding another exciting dimension to its organization thanks to a recent US Department of Education mentoring grant.

"In October 2007, Birth Choice was approved for an educational grant that is allowing us to manage an expanded mentoring program with Christian Mentors of Hemet," said Jennifer Cartell, executive director of Birth Choice. "This program will offer no-cost mentoring to families with children in fourth to eighth grade who are in need of support."

This mentoring program, explained Cartell, will help diminish high-risk behavior that leads to excessive absenteeism and low grade point averages (GPAs).

"The grant requires a review of baseline GPAs and absenteeism and improvement resulting from the children's meetings with a volunteer," said Cartell.

This volunteer will be an FBI-screened mentor.

The new program is gaining momentum. It strives to decrease high-risk behavior, promote children's wellbeing and empower them to reach for their dreams.

"Our volunteer mentors will be able to help these children achieve measurable success," Cartell said. "Parents, schoolteachers, counselors, pastors and other community members will also benefit, as they will have a place to refer potentially troubled youth or for youth who have high-risk circumstances."

The grant that Birth Choice received is in the amount of \$197,000, said Cartell, but the funds are kept at the US Department of Education.

According to Cartell, the funds are only distributed as the mentoring is completed, and moreover, most of the money will not be used by Birth Choice.

"The [funds] will come in over the period of one year and will be distributed to the



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mentoring organizations and for mentoring only," explained Cartell.

Being a Christian-based nonprofit, Cartell said they will use the money to provide mentoring to all children, regardless of race, religion or nationality.

"Our services are free and confidential," she said. "Government monies will only be used to facilitate mentoring of kids with signed permission from their parents."

In the grant process, Birth Choice teamed with St. Anthony's of Long Beach and Christian Mentors of Hemet. This partnership was advantageous, explained Cartell, because the other institutions already had seasoned, successful mentoring programs.

"Both of these organizations had the ability to mentor children, collect report card baseline information and past academic success and train volunteer mentors to mentor children at no cost," said Cartell. "Additionally, [St. Anthony's and Christian Mentors] already had the infrastructure in place to collect and report data, collect mentoring session information, ensure thorough background checks [including fingerprinting] and communicate a positive program to the community."

Cartell said Birth Choice is ecstatic to be under the same mentoring "umbrella" as these other organizations because their reputation and ongoing success helping children and families has been outstanding.

Mentoring that will take place through Birth Choice may be done at their location; however, Cartell said that mentoring may also be done off-site. "Most of the mentoring will take place at public places, such as athletic events, public park activities, restaurants or other places agreeable to the parent and the mentor."

The activities that mentors will conduct with children will be fun and uplifting, Cartell said. The mentor, she explained, will serve like a big brother or big sister for the child.

"The mentor will help [the child] feel good about themselves, avoid high-risk behaviors and strive for academic excellence," said Cartell.

For this grant, the age group Birth Choice will work with is a critical one. In their professional experience, they typically see girls 14 years of age and younger already involved in high-risk behavior.

This behavior can involve drugs, alcohol and sexual activity. It is the goal of the group to reach out to children early on, before high-risk behaviors manifest.

"It is our hope that we can help kids and parents avoid these high-risk behaviors altogether through mentoring," said Cartell. "Often, parents are at their wits' end, not sure what to do with their troubled child and helpless to find the answer; our volunteer mentors will help them find the answers."

Some professionals contend that children are, at times, more willing to "open up" to a mentor than a parent.

Even though the grant focuses on children in fourth through eighth grade, Christian Mentors enrolls kids ages 6 through 18, said Cartell.

Like any nonprofit, there is always a need for dedicated volunteers.

"The public can help by signing up to be a volunteer mentor, spending one hour per week for one year to help a child succeed; they can also refer their children to the program or tell other parents, teachers or counselors about it," said Cartell.

To learn more about this mentoring program, log on to www.christianmentors.org.

For more information about Birth Choice, visit www.birthchoicetemecula.com or call (951) 699-9808.

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behavior"

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