

Article Regarding FCFC Visits for the “Juvenile Jottings”

By Frances Strickland, Ohio’s First Lady

John Glenn spoke of the need for leadership that uncovers the “liberating opportunities concealed within daunting challenges.” He believes “this is the defining ability of American genius.” I believe the ability of the Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet (OFCF Cabinet) and local county Family and Children First Councils (FCFC) to find ways to help families deal with our increasingly complex world will be its defining genius as well.

The purpose of Family and Children First is coordination and collaboration of services impacting children and families at the state level and in our local communities, but it is also about leadership. We need strong leadership at the local level just as much as at the state level. The local FCFCs meet regularly with public and private service providers and parent representatives.

I agreed to accept the appointment as Chair of the OFCF Cabinet because it provides a direct path to the front-lines of human services, and so far, it is the best decision I have made as First Lady. Both Ted and I worry about losing touch with the real world problems facing Ohioans given the fact there are 88 counties to cover. We know the danger of letting numbers and statistics drown out the stories of real people whose lives have significantly benefited from supportive services as well as those whose needs fall through the proverbial crack. The county FCFCs visits keep that from happening.

Various OFCF Cabinet Directors go with me from time to time and we have heard many helpful and moving stories. Particularly compelling was the woman who experienced “Wraparound” from the local FCFC after she broke under the weight of trying to care for her suicidal teenage daughter. She said it was as if they put their arms around her and said: “Don’t worry. We’re going to get through this together.” Step by step they helped her bring her world back under control. Then there was the unwed mother who turned to the Juvenile Judge and thanked her for helping her out of her drug-dominated world—a world of abuse and prostitution where she felt she was looked down on as having the worst reputation in her county. We read the writings of a young girl pleading for adults to care about the rough times young people go through now. Several parents of children with severe developmental delays talked of how Help Me Grow saved their lives. We also heard firsthand about the lack of available health care services, transportation services, youth transitional supports, respite care, and kinship supports.

I see Family and Children First as a dynamic system that constantly seeks to improve itself through continual learning and discovery of creative and innovative solutions through interagency interactions and collaborations. There is no shortage of impressive professionals and we expect to learn more from them through follow-up meetings, possibly through teleconferencing. We also need local multi-agency

engagement to help develop a seamless system of care, including alignment of existing services and planning for filling the gaps in services.

The most exciting part as Chair of the OFCF Cabinet is the opportunity to work closely with the Cabinet Directors. Each Director is dedicated to finding better ways to serve, including removing unnecessary barriers and restrictions. These Directors include: Terry Collins (Rehabilitation and Correction), Angela Cornelius Dawson (Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services), Dr. Alvin Jackson (Health), Helen Jones-Kelley (Jobs and Family Services), John Martin (MRDD), Barbara Riley (Aging), Pari Sabety (Budget and Management), Sandy Stephenson (Mental Health), Tom Stickrath (Youth Services), and Dr. Susan Zelman (Education). Also participating on OFCFC are Robin Harris and Amy Rohling McGee (Governor's Executive Assistants for Health and Human Services), and Alicia Leatherman, Director of the Early Childhood Cabinet.

The goal to visit each of the 88 counties will be reached by the end of July—having completed 73 visits to date. Visiting every county is important because each county has unique needs and service priorities, along with different leadership qualities and styles. We ask about their problems and concerns, but we are equally interested in any ideas they have for solutions to the problems. We look for “returning themes” as a way of helping the OFCF Cabinet prioritize statewide challenges and problems. These returning themes include the need for behavioral treatment programs for severely disturbed children and youth, alarming increases in the levels of youthful substance abuse and suicide attempts, and the need for support during times of transition either out of the youth system or from one program to another. Also frequently mentioned are issues related to excessive paperwork required by the State, redundant data entry, and “silo funding”.

Currently, the OFCF Cabinet has formed two work groups at the Deputy Directors' level, headed by OFCF Cabinet Director—Angela Sausser Short. One group is exploring a data collection system that could possibly be linked between agencies and the other deals with the potential for more flexible funding related to grants than is now available.

Some confusion has been expressed about the role Juvenile Judges can play on the local FCFCs. I can say, almost without exception, that those Juvenile Judges who do participate in the FCFC process provide a positive effect that is difficult to put into words. Their compassion and willingness to work with the other agencies responsible for helping troubled youth has resulted in far better outcomes than experienced earlier and at a greatly reduced cost to the community. Further, Juvenile Judges show incredible insight and understanding in their decisions and rulings. They recognize the complicated family situations our young people deal with today and work with Youth Services and family services to find ways to keep them in their communities.

In September, we will begin the second round of visits to the 88 counties. Our hope is that we established a good working relationship in the first visits and

that the second round will lead to even deeper discussions. At the same time, the OFCF Cabinet is working on identified problems as well as considering suggested remedies and implementation strategies. This cycle of continuous face-to-face communications between the state and local levels is the best way I know of to show that we do value the work the FCFCs do and that we are committed to a new style of leadership and support.