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ACES gets support for grant to help at-risk youth

BOB ROBINSON
Associate Editor
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GREENVILLE – The Community Connectors Grant requires partnering with at least one school district with a high percentage of students living in poverty and not graduating on time... done. It requires a faith based organization in each district to work in the program... done. And it requires partnering with at least one local business. That was accomplished Feb. 10.

Jeff Vaughn, ACES Coordinator for the Council on Rural Services, talked to members of the business community, faith based organizations, Darke County Chamber of Commerce members, school superintendents and more. The meeting was set up by Chamber Director Sharon Deschambeau and hosted by Wayne Healthcare. Vaughn wanted to see if he had local support for Gov. John Kasich's Community Connectors initiative to help at-risk youth, grades 5-12, in a 1-on-1 mentoring program.

"I think the support's there," Vaughn said at the conclusion of the meeting. He added it was important the whole community be involved; not just the Council on Rural Services.

The idea of the program is to mentor, 1-on-1, students who are at risk in the local schools. The target population is part of more than 5,300 grade 5-12 students in the combined Darke County districts. Most of students, Vaughn said, would not fall into this category, but as many as 1,000 or more could.

He had prepared a draft proposal allowing for Gateway Youth Programs (GYP) to employee Mentor/Youth Advocates to be in the schools, GYP and faith-based partners to recruit 1-on-1 volunteer mentors, and partner businesses for skill building related to job readiness and work ethics. Kasich's Community Connectors initiative will fund up to $500,000 on a matching grant, with a 3 to 1 match the first year, 2 to 1 the second and 1 to 1 the third; the program is to be self-sustaining starting in year four.

Vaughn said Mississinawa Valley and Tri-Village were the partner districts, the First Baptist Church in Union City and Cedar Grove Church in New Madison were the partner faith based organizations... he didn't yet have the business partners. By the end of the meeting he had two: Wayne Healthcare and Recovery & Wellness Centers of Midwest Ohio.

According to the grant application, once he had a partner school district matching the required criteria, all districts could participate. He'd had a positive response from all but one so far; he expected that to be positive as well. For purposes of the application, he broke it out two ways: two youth advocates placed in schools at an eventual overall cost of $102,649 per year, or five youth advocates at an eventual overall cost of $239,189 per year. He was quick to note to the audience those amounts were overall expenses, not just salaries.

Following his presentation he said he was pretty confident he could come up with the money needed for two advocates each year, but it would take five to cover all districts in Darke County. This would be splitting one advocate between Franklin Monroe and Arcanum, and one between Mississinawa Valley and Ansonia. He told the group the concern was not running the program in years one through three when the state was helping to fund it; it was what happens when they were on their own. "I don't want to start this program and after three years say, sorry, no more money," he said.

Jeff Vaughn, ACES Coordinator, CORS

Darke County Juvenile/Probate Judge Jason Aslinger told the group about two boys from his courtroom who had their lives turned around by a mentor. He believed this program was needed to help at-risk kids. Deschambeau noted Darke County's aging workforce; that the population is predicted to decrease by more than 5,000 people by 2040.

"We need to invest in our youth," she said. "Invest in our future workforce."