

**BULLETIN OF REPORTS**

**REPORT OF BETHESDA CHILDREN'S HOME / LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES**

**Report to Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly**

Throughout Bethesda's 92-year history, we have lived by the adage, "when one door closes another opens." Times continue to change, and – in contrast to the recent past – the prevailing philosophy of county children and youth services dictates that, whenever possible, treatment should be locally based. With residential treatment forming the cornerstone of our agency, this comparatively rapid change in approach left Bethesda facing what appeared to be a closed door. Yet, numbers do not lie, and the fact remains that there are thousands of Pennsylvania children and families who need our help. Our challenge is to do what we've done so many times in the past: adapt to our environment by modifying existing and creating new programming. Like most adaptations, ours has not been pain free: reluctantly, we have reduced our workforce and we have restricted what, in normal circumstances, would have been wise spending. However, I am proud to say that, as a result of the efforts of an incredible staff, Bethesda's door is opening on a brand new day....

We know that, given our excellent reputation, residential care will continue to be an important aspect of what we do, but we are now equally focused on non-residential programs, as well as community outreach services, such as Foster Care and Behavioral Health Rehabilitation Services. Already, we have increased the capacity of our Partial Program by fifty percent, and this program promises to be full in short order. We have also been awarded a contract for an Independent Living Program which will teach independent living skills to approximately 160 youth. And we are in the homestretch of obtaining a State Wide Adoption Network affiliation (SWAN), which will allow us to facilitate adoptions.

I am especially pleased with our New Character Development initiative which began in the fall of 2010. This new initiative at Bethesda incorporates values such as honesty, respect, perseverance, courage, and compassion into our curriculum and therapy modalities, engaging not just our clients, but also our staff. In fact, this program is one of only twenty-nine from the state of Pennsylvania that have been selected to be part of a Quality Improvement Initiative study – a project spearheaded by a partnership between The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth, and Families. As part of this study, experts from the National Center for Juvenile Justice will help Bethesda to establish a reliable methodology for measuring the effectiveness of our Character Development Program, a methodology which we can then apply to other programs to ensure that we are utilizing our resources effectively.

One program whose effectiveness is without a doubt a success is our Christmas program. In 2010, thanks to the generosity of church members throughout the Northwestern and Southwestern Pennsylvania Synods, not only did our kids have, as one child exclaimed, “the best Christmas ever,” but we were also able to adopt a few *families* of children in our non-residential Partial Program, families who we knew to be in dire need. Thank you for the incredible support you have given us, not just at Christmas, but throughout the year: your prayers, financial contributions, and other gifts are an intrinsic part of our success. What’s more, our kids recognize that our Lutheran constituents care about their welfare; we have faith that, ultimately, this will translate into kids being more receptive to the word of God. As always, Pastor Fraser gave her all for the kids: as well as observing the full liturgical calendar, she led Vacation Church School, bible study, support groups, and outreach projects – for both local concerns and Lutheran World Relief. In addition, Pastor Fraser was instrumental in furthering kids educational, cultural, and good old fashioned fun experiences, by coordinating a host of different field trips, along with our day and week-long summer camps.

All of us at Bethesda Children’s Home are excited by a future which challenges us to develop new ways to give our children the gift of such experiences, new ways to honor our mission, and new ways to remain steadfast to our Lutheran heritage. As I picture the growth made possible by our upcoming capital campaign, I see improving both the spatial and technical capacity of our school as primary. For, in the realm of educating at-risk and emotionally/behaviorally challenged children and youth, demand is high and Bethesda’s expertise is second to none. After engaging leaders in the youth development arena in Erie and receiving their pledge to work alongside us, we know the *real* as opposed to perceived needs of at-risk families in that city, and we know how to design programming to meet those needs. Here, in our Erie Center for Musical Expression and Leadership, the digital recording and technical possibilities will speak to budding musicians, singers, writers, poets, journalists, interviewers, organizers, marketers, web mavens, and those with other skill sets and interests. Here, we will affirm youth as we encourage and strengthen their talents, confidence, and hope. Here – and in Meadville – we will actualize our faith and our mission by embracing the spirit of our times, by continuing to be the place where Healing Begins, and by ensuring that Bethesda’s door is never closed in the face of our children.

In His Name,



Gene Wisinski, Executive Director

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