

Commissioners' Workshop Meeting Tuesday, December 9, 2008

I. CALL TO ORDER:

The Berks County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Tuesday, December 9, 2008 at 10:30 A.M. in the thirteenth floor Board Room of the Berks County Services Center, pursuant to due notice to Board members and the public.

Commissioner Chair Mark C. Scott called the meeting to order with Commissioner Christian Leinbach, and Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt in attendance. Also present were County Administrator, William E. Dennis, Solicitor Alan Miller Esq. and Chief Clerk Terry Styer. Commissioner Scott noted that the board held two executive sessions to discuss personnel matters as well as litigation on Monday December 8, 2008

II. Commissioner Scott opened the meeting with a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

III. PRESENTATION

Richard Kauffman, Director, Berks County Cooperative Extension introduced Mike McDavid, NE Regional Extension Director and Extension County Commissioners Association of PA (CCAP) Liaison who discussed his involvement with CCAP. Richard then introduced Andy Beck, Berks and Schuylkill County Horticultural Educator.

George Kovarie and Sue Dopsovic of Berks County Children and Youth Services (CYS) presented a Report on truancy issues in Berks County (copy attached to these minutes) and Mark Braun, Retired Guidance Counselor from Reading School District and member of the Children and Youth Advisory Agency who also discussed CYS involvement in Truancy issuances.

IV. DEPARTMENTAL REPORTS / REQUESTS:

Budget Department:

- A. Adopt Resolution authorizing 2008 Budget Transfers in the amount of \$434,433 and 2008 Appropriations in the amount \$300,000 per listing dated December 5, 2008.
- B. Motion authorizing Mark C. Scott as Chairman of the Board, to execute Contract Agreements/ Amendments as furnished by the Contract Coordinator, per attached listing dated December 5, 2008.

- C. Adopt a resolution authorizing the award and execution, as a result of Invitation to Bid #08-10R-MB, a one year contract to supply and deliver via tank wagon, #2 heating oil and ultra low sulfur diesel via tank wagon and transport truck to and for members of the Berks County Cooperative Purchasing Council (BCCPC) of which the County of Berks is a member as per the attached listing.

Children and Youth Services:

- A. Adopt Resolution authorizing a purchase of service agreement between Berks County Children and Youth Services (BCCYS) and the Court of Common Pleas of Berks County for the provision of Guardian Ad Litem to represent the legal interests and the best interests of children who have been adjudicated dependent and/or alleged to be depended in every stage of proceedings in the Court of Common Pleas, Juvenile Division and Orphans' Court.

Engineer:

- A. Adopt a resolution authorizing the execution of PennDOT Form MS-340 Application to Encumber Liquid Fuels Funds in the amount of \$750,000 for replacement of the Bridge on Schaeffer Road across the Willow Creek in Maiden creek Township.
- B. Adopt a resolution authorizing the execution of PennDOT Form MS-340 Application to Encumber Liquid Fuels Funds in the amount of \$250,000 for replacement reconstruction and resurfacing of County Road in Bern Township.

Human Resources:

- A. Human Resource Recommendations per list dated December 9, 2008.

Public Defender / District Attorney

- A. Adopt Resolution authorizing the execution of the FY 2008 JABG #19845 (Juvenile Accountability Block Grant) Application by and between the County of Berks (Chief Public Defender) and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), with respect to funding in the amount of \$23,633.00 (Federal Funds - \$21,270.00; Local Matching Funds - \$2,363.00) covering the project period 4/1/09 to 3/31/10.
- B. Adopt Resolution authorizing the execution of the FY 2008 JABG #19832 (Juvenile Accountability Block Grant) Application by and between the County of Berks (District Attorney) and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), with respect to funding in the amount of \$23,633.00 (Federal Funds - \$21,270.00; Local Matching Funds - \$2,363.00) covering the project period 4/1/09 to 3/31/10.

Solicitor

- A. Resolution authorizing tax forgiveness and refund of the 2008 County taxes paid for parcel #44-5431-11-65-8150, St. Paul's United Church of Christ, Fleetwood, in the amount of \$633.41 including all penalties and interest.

V. COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR REPORT:

- A. Weekly Report

VI. REPORTS FROM COMMISSIONERS:**Commissioner Leinbach**

Commissioner Leinbach discussed the filing of a lawsuit by CCAP (County Commissioners Association of PA) with the State Supreme Court asking that they force the State Legislature to enforce a 1996 order regarding County funding for the costs of the lower judiciary. He said this could mean as much as \$35 million for Berks County.

Commissioner Leinbach then reported on a recent tour he participated in at the Reading Bakery Systems Technical Center stating his amazement for the technological innovations made in this plant despite the current state of the economy.

Commissioner Barnhardt

- A. Adopt a resolution re-appointing Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt to serve as the 2009 Commissioner Director for the Berks County MH/MR Advisory Board for a one year term, expiring 12/31/2009.
- B. Adopt a resolution re-appointing Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt to serve as the 2009 Commissioner Member of the Berks County Criminal Justice Advisory Board (CJAB) for a one year term, expiring 12/31/2009.

VII. PUBLIC COMMENT:

Reverend Rush encouraged the Commissioners to "stay on task" with the Community Re-entry project and discussed some pending legislation to support similar county initiatives. Commissioner Leinbach indicated that all counties are watching this legislation closely because to date, no state funding has been tied to the legislation.

There being no further business the meeting adjourned at 11:45 AM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Terry L. Styer, Chief Clerk

Truancy and CYS Services
By Sue Dobsovic, CYS Caseworker

Since the inception of the Truancy Unit at BCCYS in 1999, the policy has been consistent. Referrals come from the schools after the school has made good faith efforts to remediate the problem, after the family has been fined twice to the District Justice and once the child has at least 10 unlawful absences in a quarter. I have been the Supervisor since 2005 and each September we send a letter to every school in the county, including private schools, describing our program, providing the necessary paperwork and encouraging the schools to make referrals as warranted. I also send a letter to every District Justice, describing the program and the criteria for referrals, noting that referrals must come from the schools.

Recap for truancy referrals received for the 2007-2008 school year:

Referrals were down significantly due to the fact that Reading School District did not refer any truants to the agency until January of 2008, due to computer software problems. During the months of October, November and December, when we are normally receiving steady referrals from Reading School District, my unit assisted the Intake Department by handling investigations for them. Between January and April, 2008, we received 65 referrals from Reading School District (83% of all the referrals for the year), but only 5 from Reading High. The remaining 13 cases came from 6 other school districts, 5 from Hamburg, 2 from Daniel Boone, 2 from Conrad Weiser, 2 from Tulpehocken and one each from Brandywine and Kutztown. This is a normal percentage from outside Reading. Referrals from Reading High have declined steadily since 2003-2004, when we received 64.

Of the 78 referrals accepted for investigation in 2007-2008:

15 were closed last year due to improved attendance
4 were closed last year when they moved out of state
1 was closed last year due to enrolling in cyberschool
5 were already open with the agency in either an in-home department or an intake unit.
8 children were placed by the agency last year and 1 was placed in a mental health facility by MH/MR
2 were adjudicated dependent and passed to in-home units for more intensive monitoring
2 were adjudicated delinquent by JPO and closed by our agency due to intensive supervision by JPO
4 were closed due to non-compliance (one was dropped from the rolls by RSD, one 15 yr old was working regularly and two moved and we were unable to locate them)

36 cases were carried over from 07-08 to this school year. The cases were either not bad enough to advance to court, not good enough to close or we were waiting for charges to be filed with Juvenile Probation and see what action they would take.

6 have been placed this year.

5 have been closed so far this year due to improved attendance.

1 has been adjudicated dependent and passed to an in-home unit for more intensive monitoring.

1 has been closed due to enrolling in cyber-school.

23 remain open at this time with the Truancy Unit.

The Truancy Unit, among other duties, provided role modeling for parents, went to homes and got students up in the morning and took them to school, advocated for children who needed special education testing, attended meetings when students had been suspended, attended IEP meetings, set up mental health evaluations, scheduled drug and alcohol evaluations or random urines, intervened with district justices to get fines reduced or dismissed when the parents were trying their best to get their kids to school, delivered food to some, found furniture and clothing for others, scheduled and provided transportation to medical, dental and mental health appointments, assisted families with getting medical insurance, and welfare benefits if warranted, assisted mothers and their children with leaving abusive paramours and supporting them as they filed PFA orders, ensured students got enrolled in a timely fashion when moving from one school to another, or when returning from a suspension, and advocated for students who had chronic health issues and the school needed documentation in order to excuse the absences, assisted families dealing with lice and other housekeeping issues, as well as maintaining regular communication with the schools.

*We are pleased with the efforts the Reading School District has made to employ more home and school visitors and we maintain a positive cooperative relationship with their staff.

Of the 8 truancy referrals I have received from District Justice Scott for this school year, the data is pretty much what we expected. They are either nearing 16, already 16 or 17. Several had incorrect addresses and phone numbers. 4 were truants last year and we did not receive school referrals for them. One will be 17 next week and intends to sign himself out of school, despite our efforts to convince him to take advantage of the Job Corp. At least 5 of the truants from last year are now repeating 9th grade which unfortunately is often a guaranteed way to set them up to fail. And of the referrals received from DJ Scott, the majority had not been contacted by a home and school visitor.

Having said all that, there are several things I think we need to look at.

Of the 15 cases we closed last year due to improved attendance, we found the following:
8 are doing well

1 has been dis-enrolled from the Reading School District

1 began to truant again and was referred again last year to the agency, subsequently closed this year due to intensive monitoring by JPO

2 are out of the RSD and we weren't able to get the data

3 are truanting again this year. We have not received referrals on these 3 students. Of these three, all were 15 when we received the referrals.

The two students we closed last year due to being adjudicated delinquent and intensive monitoring by JPO, are both 15 and both are still truanting.

Of the 8 students doing well, the ages range from 7 to 13.

We went back another year, to 2006-2007 to check on those cases we closed out for improved attendance. **100% of the students who would meet criteria for a truancy referral today were 14 or 15 when we got the referral.** Research has shown that truancy intervention works best with students under the age of 15 and while these are just two small samplings, it bears out what we see every year.

Trends that my unit sees:

Transiency – parents who constantly move, never pay rent, get evicted, then move again

Parents without landlines. They buy prepaid phones and then discard them, making it harder for us to maintain contact with them.

Increase in marijuana smoking at younger ages and less concern about it by parents.

*We do want to commend the school district for coming up with administrative guidelines for when students are either caught with or involved with drugs and alcohol. In the past, there was no consistent procedure for how to handle each situation.

Negative attitudes by school staff – We work hard to get kids to school, some of whom have not set foot in a school for months. They are often met with less than welcoming remarks by staff. These kids need to feel that they are wanted in school and until we have walked in their shoes and really know how they have lived and what they have gone through, we can never understand what has brought them to this place.

Increasing fear - students not feeling safe in school – One of my workers had a meeting scheduled at NEMS last week right after the stabbing. She was trying to get two very anxious students enrolled and she was unable to get them into the school due to all the police activity.

Students/parents reporting bullying to school personnel and staff not responding. We were assured by the Reading School District last year that they would be using the Olweus Anti-Bullying Program.

Increasing gang involvement, or gang “wannabees,” by younger and younger children. We are seeing grandparents who are Latin Kings, parents who are Latin Kings and now the 9 or 10 year children are being groomed to join. Some join simply for protection.

Increasing number of parents being terrorized by their teen age children due to aggression and police refusing to act when they are called. Children demanding their SSI checks or support checks from parents.

Increasing numbers of even younger pregnant teens. When your mother was 15 when she got pregnant and your grandmother was 16 when she got pregnant, there is very little we can say or do to dissuade a 14 year old from doing the same.

Increasing numbers of students who have mental health issues who are not compliant with treatment and/or medication. Mental health services are voluntary, so unless we petition the court, we can not force cooperation with services.

My workers are also seeing an increasing number of parents who are in need of mental health services.

There is currently a waiting list with SAM for mental health services and the majority of the mental health providers in the area that offer wraparound or family based services all have waiting lists. It's also getting more difficult to get providers to drive outside of the city to offer those services.

Fines create stress on the family. Most of these families are low income and struggle to make ends meet. When a child truants, if the family can't afford the fines, the family's breadwinner can end up in jail, which can sometimes lead to them losing their job. Further, some truant teens who are getting SSI checks, feel that since their SSI can pay their fines, they can continue their behavior until they are old enough to get signed out of school.

*We also want to commend the Reading School District on the positive improvements they have made with their alternative education program, Excel. It makes a huge difference to be able to actually encourage students to attend the school and tout the advantages of doing so rather than to try and downplay the negatives.

I have begun to contact other agencies in the state that share the same demographics as Berks County does in order to see how they handle truancy. One particular model, which I am told by Lackawanna County is working quite effectively, uses a combination of school, JPO, District Justice, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol and CYS personnel to work together as a team to assess and provide guidance for every identified truant. This mirrors the Integrated Children's Services Plan which DPW is working to institute in order to decrease duplication of services and provide a more streamlined and effective response to children's needs. Interestingly enough, Lackawanna does not fine parents or students because they have found it to be ineffective.

The agency feels strongly that truancy is a community problem that should first be addressed by the school, but that ultimately needs to be dealt with collaboratively, with each stakeholder taking an active role in resolving the issue. However, with students 16 and older who make it clear they won't return to school, it might be more cost effective to provide vocational training as a means of ensuring they become productive members of society and not criminals, as opposed to taking them to court, adjudicating them dependent and paying for foster care until they are 18.