



The Path to Today

Community change efforts leading to today's
Connections Count Summit meeting

In March 2005, four year old Aiyana Gauvin died of blunt force trauma after months of torture and abuse by her father and step-mother. Two more children died that same year-one neglect case where a child was strangled while sleeping in his stroller and an abuse case where a child died at the hands of her father's girlfriend. This culminated in a year that demonstrated 50% growth in children coming before the courts in abuse and neglect matters and a community interest never rivaled in prior years. These heartbreaking deaths put the community spot light on the urgent need for prevention, collaboration between agencies and early intervention against child abuse and neglect. The increasing numbers of children that were involved with the child welfare system as victims of abuse in Tippecanoe County and the tragic death of Aiyana Gauvin lead to a community's demand for action.

Responding to this demand, the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette and the League of Women Voter's teamed with Tippecanoe Superior Court 3 and sponsored a series of public forums to increase awareness and generate solutions. These evening forums were held over a period of six months and invited widespread public participation. The first forum informed the community about the scope of child abuse and neglect in our county. The second focused on services already in place in the county to address the problems and included a resource fair of local service agencies. The third forum, which included a volunteer fair, addressed the problems and generated ideas about "where we go from there."

Following the forums, the Lafayette Community Foundation, Juvenile Court and others agreed to sponsor a full day Stopping Child Abuse-Neglect Summit in November 2005. Preparation for this summit drew from the forum ideas and opinions of the public and participating professionals. Additionally, a Community Report Card was developed by the Tippecanoe County Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Policy Board (now known as the Our Kids Are Our Community). The board continues to act in the present day to assess risks and protective factors in this community in an effort to promote healthy youth and effective prevention strategies.

With the community Report Card and public participation, the initial summit's focus was to inform regarding the Search Institutes' Healthy Communities Model, which includes the 40 Developmental Assets essential to every child's success. (<http://www.search-institute.org/>). This model acknowledges that every single person can be building assets for a child, not just government, school or family. The event drew more than 400 community participants to a successful day that honored the lives of lost children and began this community's journey towards a safer environment and healthier children.

Sub-groups formed at the conclusion of the 2005 summit and worked into 2006 in areas of pre-school, parenting and childcare, school-aged children and parenting, neighborhood and

community, children and health and children and the courts/justice system. These groups worked through much of 2006 to create solutions around the known issues and barriers. During these sub-group meetings and efforts, awareness continued to be raised, discussion continued to occur and strategies began to be employed. As the 2006 summit date drew nearer, the groups were undoubtedly at different stages of their cohesion and success. The 2006 summit was an event to provide some energy to those groups and to new participants to help narrow the focus to effective prevention strategies and to provide concrete tools to individuals, volunteers, businesses and churches about how their help could be given.

A summit was held again in 2007 drawing similar crowds of participants as in 2006 and carrying the themes that continued to offer community wide intervention strategies to assist in the health, safety and well-being of our children.

Although the origins of community response to child abuse and neglect are deeply rooted in the tragedy of 2005, by the end of 2007, it became clear that the safety and protection of children must be a community responsibility. The ability of the community and the individual in the community to be fully supported in their efforts is the challenge that remains in the coming months and years. Leadership from professionals with the knowledge and tools needs to be open, effective, clear and within the grasp of every individual in Tippecanoe County.

By moving this work to the next level it was determined that it is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of what is happening in our community so that concrete plans can be developed and executed. A community change model was drafted and it was decided to conduct two Think Tank meetings with limited participation. One meeting focused on child abuse and neglect prevention and the second on juvenile delinquency prevention.

The premise for each of these meetings was that the “root causes” of juvenile delinquency and child abuse and neglect are no different in Tippecanoe County than they are anywhere else in the world. What is different from community to community is the particular constellation of causes – and the barriers to overcoming them.

For each Think Tank meeting research was reviewed and compiled into a “white paper” as a backdrop for considering local data about root causes, as well as data about the children and families living in Tippecanoe County (available at www.ourkidstippecanoe.org and www.cfr.org).

The process for each Think Tank meeting was similar. Thirty community members from a variety of disciplines (see enclosed list of participants) met together for half a day to discuss and prioritize the root causes. Each group identified a problem statement related to the issue. The problem statement had to be something the group felt it could effectively intervene on and had to be based on the research and local data.

After the identification of a problem statement the group brainstormed, without restriction, the root causes of the identified problem. Individual participants then assigned a score to each of the root causes identified based on how much each individual thought the cause impacted the

problem statement. The individual scores were then combined to produce a group “ranking” for each root cause.

To further focus the discussion an additional set of questions were developed to use to evaluate how to identify the root causes in Tippecanoe County that could be most effectively impacted by local efforts. This led to the identification of the top four root causes for child abuse and neglect and delinquency that the groups felt could be impacted by a concerted community effort and result in successful prevention efforts.

The problem statements and top root causes are detailed on the attached sheets – blue for child abuse and neglect and green for juvenile delinquency.

Based on this information, two types of interventions that are present in the community and are best practices were identified for exploration during the 2009 Summit. Home visiting programs have been identified as best practice for the prevention of child abuse and neglect and mentoring is identified as a best practice in the area of delinquency prevention. A community discussion about the current services in the community in these two areas will help us identify where there are gaps in services and how we can strengthen these services for the benefit of community youth.

It is the hope that this discussion will be the first of many about ways to increase connections – the ones *with* youth and the ones *between* those who labor on their behalf. Research is clear about the primacy of relationships and connections and about the healing and helping that occurs within relationships. Increased connections – real connections – among the adults who care about children will only improve and expand the impact that we can have on children. This work has been designed to create a shared vision for our youth and an action plan that is grounded in reality, fueled by best practices and lives in the relationships that we create together.