CAMBRIDGE MATTERS – 2022-01

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With a New Year and a new focus, I write to let my current readers know that Dave Wheelan of the Talbot Spy has asked me to share my information and thoughts through his publication, which is read up and down the Eastern Shore. In addition, as I am past a year since being on the Cambridge City Council and my areas of community interest have shifted, I will be writing less about City and County government and more about the work of Moving Dorchester Forward (MDF) in which I am engaged with other members of our community.

To let my new readers understand what I am about and where my interests lie, I need to provide you with some of my history to understand my ideas and perspectives. So, today will include some introduction that my current readers already know. For everyone, however, I need to tell you about Moving Dorchester Forward (MDF) and what we are trying to do here in Dorchester County to improve outcomes for children and families in a number of aspects of their lives.

MDF is not a service provider but rather a group of citizens that are advocating for improved outcomes for children and families, improved and funded resources for programming and treatment of children, and greater engagement of our community in finding solutions for the many challenges that the children face and we as a community face with regard to our children now and in the years to come.

After 15 years on the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Bench (JDR) in Alexandria, Virginia, and another 15 years of consulting on Child Welfare issues in several states, I know that the ability of communities to address challenges for some of their youth is limited by available federal, state, and local government resources as well as how much non-governmental resources exist in the community. Solutions are also limited by the knowledge in the community about successful programs and by the interest of the community to undertake projects to address the needs of those children who are struggling.

I also know that a program that might work in one community may not work in another for any number of reasons but might work if modified to suit the needs and available resources in a community. As with politics, making change to improve lives is a local issue. The vast majority of the children are not “bad” children but are most often children having difficulty in school and in community or in relationships with other children; or they are children, through no fault of their own, that are living in troubled families and/or have substance abuse or mental health issues of their own. They are children that need a new direction.

As I have mentioned to some people before, when I went on the bench in 1989, Alexandria, VA, was just starting to deal with the Crack Cocaine epidemic that engulfed the country and the many children in our community that became involved in the using and buying and selling of drugs. My court days were much longer and more intense than any day I experienced as a lawyer. My first response was to do what everyone else was doing – punish those who I found delinquent or transfer them to Circuit Court for trial as an adult.

I soon learned that punishment alone or sending a youth to adult court for trial was not the answer nor did it stem the tide of cases coming before me. I put too many children into detention homes with more experienced delinquents who then taught them how to be better delinquents or criminals.

With the help and guidance of others, I learned that effective programming and holding youth accountable with speedy trials and hands-on probation officers and services was part of the solution. The other part was identifying the behaviors of youth early and providing programs that prevented them moving into or moving deeper into the juvenile justice system. Our juvenile system became proactive, in the right sense of the word, to address behavioral issues early while also responding after their bad behavior had violated the law.

The Challenge for Cambridge, Dorchester County, and, probably, much of the Eastern Shore is that rural communities have many of the same challenges as larger counties and cities, but there are few, if any, programs or resources to effectively address those problems. Most state resources often go to the more populous communities where the need is even greater; and in rural areas, the counties do not have adequate local taxable income to provide resources to address these issues in addition to providing all of the other resources required to effectively run local government. The other issue is that the longer a community waits to address problems in their youth population, the more costly and time consuming are the solutions.

Recently, a group has developed here in Dorchester County that we are calling “Moving Dorchester Forward” (MDF). It is focusing on education issues, mental health, court involved children, after school programs, and advocacy within the community. My area of focus is on court involved or court diverted children and advocacy. My plan for future articles is to give you some ideas of what I have seen from my experience that works along with what we are working on here.

My hope is that these articles can provide some understanding of the issues that children in all of our communities face where the juvenile court could become involved and ways that counties and cities here on the Eastern Shore alone or in collaboration with other nearby counties could begin to address these concerns proactively. Because I am not familiar with all that is happening in every county on the Eastern Shore, some good things may be happening about which I am not aware. If they are and you know about them, please provide me or the Spy publication and your local newspaper with information about what is happening where you live. We can learn from one another.

An example of how we can learn from one another comes from my experience from what became National Adoption Saturday that occurs in November every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Before it became a National Day, it started with Judge Mike Nash in Los Angeles.

He started it because of the challenge that he faced in the back up and delay in adoptions that his court was experiencing. His solution was to bring in a group of his fellow judges and volunteer attorneys that moved several hundred adoptions to completion on a Saturday.

I was involved in a project with Judge Nash and so went to his presentation about his initiative at a National Judicial Conference. I brought the idea back to Alexandria, and our court team adopted the idea that was led by our CASA program and our Department of Social Services. They made it happen. From there it spread through Virginia. At the same time judges from all over the country were adopting the idea that became National Adoption Day. What was at first a problem that had a solution because of a Judge’s idea became a National Day of Celebration of the adoption of many children from all over the country who were in Foster Care.

Some topics that I plan to address include truancy, shelter care, effective and proactive solutions and programming, and how the community needs to become involved to both advocate for and provide resources that are not otherwise available or are limited. Based on all of the information that I have seen about mental health issues during the COVID – 19 Pandemic, every community and every school and many children are needing to address how to get help and locate where those resources are. Finding them is not easy and figuring out how they might be brought to your community or supported in your community, if they are already there, is critical.

Please share your ideas with me and with others in your community. We are losing too many children to poor educational outcomes, delinquency and later criminal behavior, and mental health and substance abuse matters that limit their ability to achieve a better life for themselves and cost us all in so many ways.

Thanks for reading.

Steve Rideout