

Youth OpEd A Better Future for Island Youth

By Susan Covino Buell

What is more precious than our children? The MDI Youth subgroup has been working to assess and address challenges they face. We are driven by the expectation that all children feel valued at home, in school, and in our community.

Why do we care? Our children embody our hope for the future. We need-and will always need-young people's talent, creativity, honesty, intelligence, strength, and curiosity. Today's youth will be tomorrow's parents, pilots, lab technicians, mechanics, doctors, and teachers. They will be our jury members and government leaders. Valuing and respecting our children now has ramifications for decades to come. The young judge us by our actions. Do these actions give them reason to believe that they are valued and respected?

What keeps some of our young people from achieving their potential? To begin to answer this question, our MDI Tomorrow Youth subgroup analyzed a range of data collected by state and local agencies. It is clear that the issues adversely affecting youth are island wide and are central concerns of our other subgroups: public health, housing, and transportation.

Transportation and Housing

The lack of convenient public transportation as well as the layout and design of our local communities make access to private vehicles a necessity for most educational, social, business, or recreational purposes. Children without ready access to private vehicles are shut out of valuable cultural opportunities. Thirty-five percent of MDI High School students do not participate in any extracurricular activity. There are no activity buses at the high school. If convenient transportation were provided, would participation increase? In a public school, how can we tolerate a system that includes only those who have rides? For children whose access to transportation is limited, what effect does this lack have on their perception of themselves, their schools, and their community? Will exclusionary transportation policies contribute to an "us versus them" mindset that carries over into adult life?

The absence of alternative transportation encourages children to pile into cars for most forms of social and recreational activities. The Department of Transportation (DOT) documents over 1000 accidents involving drivers age 16-21 on MDI between 1991 and 2000. More than half occurred between noon and

8PM. Our children should have other options besides social isolation or an automotive roulette that inflicts death or life-long injury on so many.

The need for a personal vehicle also creates an incentive to work extended hours all year. Although we acknowledge and applaud the discipline, sacrifice, and work ethic required to hold a job, we worry about the costs to a young person's development. Do long hours on the job-often at the expense of sleep, family, and education-help young people fulfill their potential or merely fund car payments?

Transportation and community design are a major factor aggravating housing costs as well. Community sprawl drives up the personal and social cost of housing and increases the time spent in travel from home to work, school, or shopping.

Cumulatively, these pressures force many parents to work two or three jobs just to maintain a minimal quality of life. Can they afford good day or after-school care? We know that parental involvement is important for students' success at school. What if parents don't have time? Who is available to help with homework and school projects?

Health.

Many health and safety issues are also cross-generational. 13.5% of Union 98 children receive free or reduced cost lunches at school. The Bar Harbor and Westside Food pantries serve hundreds of Island families with children all year long.

Drug, alcohol, and tobacco addictions, obesity and lack of fitness, and unsafe sexual practices increase the health risks of individuals and the community. Of the nine most common STDs, six are curable, but only twenty to thirty percent of infected people have any visible symptoms. STDs can be catalysts for cancer and HIV infection.

There is a clear link between alcohol use and unprotected sex. Our goal must be to give young people the resources to protect themselves from injury, death, life long addiction, and sexual predation. We must lessen the risks of risky behaviors.

Lack of fitness and obesity are increasingly serious problems. Sometimes keeping our children healthy and safe means providing fun and accessible activities. "Cut" policies at some middle schools and the high school make it hard for some students to participate. Eligibility rules can have unintended consequences. We applaud the island's middle schools' re-examination of their eligibility

requirements. Rec centers and schools must work together to create intramurals and alternative fitness programs.

Gyms must be made available to maximize use and participation. Town planners must work to increase the number of sidewalks and bike lanes.

Holistic Solutions

How can we create a sustainable structure that will move us toward our goal of improving the well being of MDI's young people? Our youth subgroup has been meeting with parents, community leaders, representatives of local schools, and other agencies that work with youth. We have decided to affiliate with the Maine Communities for Children (C4C) initiative. Although this agency is connected to the state government, no control emanates from the state. Identification of issues and methods of implementation and assessment are determined locally. We feel the C4C model will help us work collaboratively and proactively to reach our goals. (The next meeting of the C4C is November 7 at 2:30PM at MDIHS.)

The issues we identified are clearly cross-generational and island wide. It is incumbent on adults to create partnerships among the key agencies that work with youth. Collaboration and communication among the community-based agencies that serve our young are essential to our children's future.

But just as adults must emphasize effective communication, another important voice must be included -that of the children themselves. A holistic approach to our problems would provide opportunities for all children, even those who have been expelled from or dropped out of schools or programs. We must give our young people a voice. They deserve safe, respectful ways to express expectations, frustrations, and challenges. We are unlikely to make sustainable progress on these issues until all stakeholders are given opportunities to shape and implement solutions.

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