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Making bigger brothers and sisters in Blaine County

Big Brothers Big Sisters seek volunteers, kids

by *DANA DUGAN*

In a perfect world everyone would have an older sibling they could look up to, respect and by whom they would feel appreciated. This big brother or sister would watch out for you, listen and give advice without judgment or negativity. But perfect worlds are few and not everyone is this fortunate.

The Hailey-based Community Drug Coalition, which has changed its name to Community Coalition, hopes to improve the health of the community by cutting down on alcohol and drug use by youth.

Mentoring is an integral part of the success of any program that helps youth. The 104-year-old Big Brothers Big Sisters of America program is the model in this mission. The largest mentoring organization in the country has nearly 400 affiliates across all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Guam. In 2007, it served 255,000 children.

Community Coalition Executive Director Terry Basolo presented his plans for bringing a Big Brothers Big Sisters program to Blaine County to the board last week. The group approved the idea with an eye toward beginning operation by April.

"One-on-one is incredibly successful," Basolo said. "We have unique problems in this valley." Basolo said there are approximately 2,500 kids in the public school system in Blaine County.

"If 75 percent of kids can be affected, that's 2,000 kids," he said. "The difference in this county is to find enough mentors."

Basolo called the program "the most important thing the county can do for our kids."

Barge Levy, the principal of Silver Alternative School, agreed.

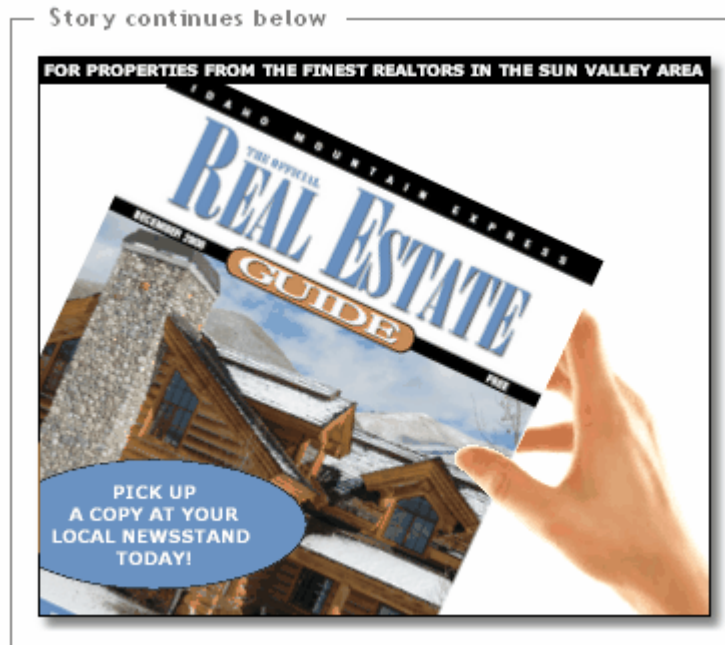
"It's good idea, so often we (teachers) end up being the mentors," Levy said. "I think it will help hugely on different levels, encouraging academics and social skills, and for kids who've gotten in trouble it would be dynamite in addition to counseling to have a big brother or big sister meet with them regularly. They need a contact, someone who's actually following them, to help them reorient."

There's never been an official Big Brothers and Sisters in the valley, though the Advocates for Survivors of Domestic Violence has a similar mentoring program.

According to national research, positive relationships between youth and their Big Brothers and Big Sisters mentors have a measurable impact on children's lives. After just 18 months, participants are more confident about school, are better able to get along with their families, are 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to use alcohol and 52 percent less likely to skip school than are their peers.



Terry Basolo surrounded by students at Silver Creek Alternative School. The director of the former Community Drug Coalition is hoping to raise enough money to bring a Big Brothers-Big Sisters program to Blaine County if the group can raise enough money. *Photo by Dana DuGan*



The Blaine County program will be a satellite of the Big Brothers Big Sisters in Boise. It requires a \$100,000 commitment to run. There are two ways to accomplish it, Basolo said. One is individual and the other is co-facilitation with someplace like the YMCA, where mentors could bring their little sister or brother for activities.

The idea is not to spend a fortune trying to entertain a child but to include the child in normal, everyday activities. It's the time spent together that is important, Basolo said.

"We need volunteers truly committed to spend an hour or so with a child twice a month," Basolo said. "We know that 18- to 34-year-olds in this valley can get really bored. If we could attract some of those people to be mentors, it could be beneficial to their lives too. Even 16- to 18-year-olds can be great with the really little kids. Our age bracket is 16 to 100 years old for mentors. We do screening and we match interests. People will do this sometimes for multiple years."

The initial commitment for a mentor is just 10 months, during which time the organization keeps in regular touch to make sure the relationship is a good fit.

"Everyone meets—the parent, child, mentor—and interviews are held," Basolo said, "Because it's a 100-year-old program they've fine-tuned all the issues. This is what makes me feel so good about bringing it here."

The program is not for everyone, Basolo admits.

"It picks up a lot of kids in the middle range. Socio-economic challenges in households put pressure on the kids. There's never been a more critical time to fund this kind of program, as I see it."

Basolo said the organization already has \$20,000 and he is applying for a federal grant from the Drug Free Communities Support Program.

Before showing the board a PowerPoint presentation, he conducted more than 30 interviews with school principals, administration and other organizations.

The Community Coalition partners with St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center, Blaine County Sheriff's Office, Blaine County School District, Hailey Police Department, Blaine County Commissioners, Council Circle, the Advocates, Yak! Youth Adult Konnections, La Alianza, Community Justice Council, Blaine County Probation Office and the Sun Club.

"We hope to move the Community Coalition office to the Community Campus," he said. "Our missions are aligned."

Another imminent plan for the organization is to help start a "tipsy taxi" program, wherein restaurants and bars would provide a free ride home for those who have no other way to avoid getting behind the wheel while intoxicated.

For more information or to donate to the Big Brothers Big Sisters program call 578-3820 or visit blainecountycdc.org.

Big Brothers Big Sisters

399 affiliates across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam. Each affiliate is a 501c3 nonprofit organization with its own staff, budget and board of directors.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the national organization, sets program standards; provides fundraising, volunteer recruitment, seed capital and supporting services to its affiliates.

Big Brothers Big Sisters served 255,000 children in 2007 -- more than twice the number of five years ago.

The organization is currently focusing on recruiting Big Brothers, especially African-Americans and Hispanics.

National organization budget: \$23 million

Affiliates' total revenue: \$246 million

Grants and donations to national organization: \$9 million

For more information about the program: www.bbbs.org

For more information about the local push for the Big Brothers Big Sisters program call 578-3820 or visit blainecountycdc.org.

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