



For Immediate Release
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MAYORS AND MENTORING

By Bill Stanczykiewicz

Three Indiana mayors are incorporating the same strategy into their overall efforts to promote youth, community and economic development.

The cities of Gary, Lebanon and Indianapolis are connected not only by I-65 but also by the common challenge of poverty. In Gary, 63 percent of children live below the poverty line; 44 percent of the students in Lebanon qualify for free or reduced price school meals; and Indianapolis has a child poverty rate of 32 percent.

While the causes of poverty are many and complex, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam says low-income children are much more likely to live in a single parent home and receive less attention from the parent(s) in their household. Presenting his data analysis at the Aspen Institute, Putnam concluded that “family and social bonds have been fraying” for low-income children.

“There is now a huge gap,” Putnam continued. “The average kid in a college-educated home is getting an hour a day more of time with their parents than the average (low-income) kid.”

In Gary, Lebanon and Indianapolis, mayors are filling that gap by recruiting volunteers to mentor at-risk children and youth.

“Mentoring is a key piece in the rebuilding of our community in Gary,” explained Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson. “You will find that most successful people had help along the way through mentorship.”

Mayor Freeman-Wilson has launched the Gary Mentoring Trust in partnership with NIPSCO, the regional utility company where Gary native Eddie Melton serves as manager of corporate citizenship and employee involvement. NIPSCO provides employees with paid time off to mentor, and Melton confidently declared, “I think mentoring is going to be a key component for the turnaround, the renewal, the revival of the city of Gary.”

In Indianapolis, Mayor Greg Ballard is dealing with one of the city's highest homicide rates in a decade. While exploring the possibility of hiring more police officers and launching a youth summer employment program, Ballard also is working with community organizations that can provide mentors for at-risk youth.

"People often approach me to ask how they can help the city, and I always suggest that they mentor a child," Ballard said. "One of the greatest things an adult can do to improve education, reduce crime and contribute to building a better city is help a young person in need and show them you care."

Lebanon Mayor Huck Lewis also is promoting mentoring to increase academic achievement and reduce poverty. The mayor's office is collaborating with the local utility company, Witham Hospital, the local United Way and community foundation, faith-based organizations, several businesses and the Boys and Girls Club to provide mentors to low-income youth.

In addition to benefitting children, Lewis said mentoring strengthens his city's economic development. "It definitely does," Lewis stated. "We're developing the next leadership in the community, and we need a trainable workforce that will match up with any community in Indiana."

Mayors have a wide range of responsibilities including potholes, parks and public safety. Despite these many priorities, the mayors of Gary, Lebanon and Indianapolis still find time to recruit mentors.

"Mentoring is prevention," according to Richard Leverett, chief of staff to Mayor Freeman-Wilson. "We can eventually spend less on public safety, on police response, on security in schools if we connect kids to folks in the community who can guide them in the ways they should be acting."

Rev. Jay Height, who serves low-income youth at Shepherd Community Center in Indianapolis, recites a simple belief when recruiting volunteer mentors. "I can give you a 100 percent guarantee that all children will be mentored," Height proclaimed. "The question is by who, or by what? Will kids be raised by parents and other caring adults, or will they be raised by the streets or by the negative influences in pop culture and social media?"

One adult, mentoring one child, at least one hour at least once a week can have a positive impact on the life of that child and that child's city. Find a mentoring organization near your home or business at: www.abetterhour.org.

Mentoring alone will not solve all of a city's problems, but leaving kids alone will only give us more problems to solve.

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