

KOSCIUSKO COUNTY'S NEED FOR A  
BIG BROTHER/BIG SISTER AGENCY

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In the summer of 1981, I became interested in joining the Big Sister/Little Sister program. While pursuing this goal, I discovered Kosciusko County had no such program and I eventually had to sign up as a Big Sister with Elkhart County's agency.

Since my participation, I have become increasingly aware of the need to establish this service for the young boys and girls of single parent families in this county.

My basic research was to find out if there is a need for a BB/BSA here, the program's history and objectives, and how an agency can be started.

How did the BB/BS movement get started? In 1903, Irvin F. Westheimer, a young businessman from Cincinnati, found a boy rummaging through a garbage pail outside the rear entrance of his office. He befriended the fatherless boy, becoming his "big brother." The next year Col. Ernest Coulter, Clerk of the New York City Children's Court, began a formal Big Brothers program for fatherless boys coming before the bench.

The Big Sisters program began in New York in 1908 but was not merged with the Big Brothers until 1977.

What is a BB/BSA and what services do they offer? It works with children from single-parent families and the service essentially matches up the child in need with an adult friend who can become a model for the child. The program's professional staff works primarily through the volunteer to monitor the progress

of the match and to provide guidance and support to volunteers in their relationship with their Little Brother or Sister.

It is predicted that forty percent of all children born since 1970 can expect to live five years or more with only one parent. Studies show the characteristic most often shared by these children is a poor self-image. They also have more academic, behavioral and emotional problems than students from two-parent homes and are four times more likely to drop out of school.

According to a 1981 article in The Mail-Journal, Lakeland School Corporation psychologist Dr. David Robinson says, "Having a male figure, as well as a female figure, in their lives is as important for girls as it is for boys." Matched LB and LS are happier, according to their parent, school grades climb, withdrawn kids open up and belligerent kids become cooperative.

Maybe the most important part of the BB/BS program is a preventative measure against juvenile delinquency. Social scientists agree that the "broken home" is the single most important factor in predicting delinquent behavior. With the help of a Big Brother or Big Sister their matched Little Brother or Little Sister will not get into trouble as often with the law.

Karen Beitler, who heads the Goshen office of Elkhart County's BB/BSA, also agrees that this preventative measure is the most important part. She stresses the fact that their program is to be used as a "real resource and not an admission of weakness" on anyone's part.

Mrs. Beitler also believes it is important for the Little Brother and Little Sister to be exposed to different values.

Last year Paul Kingston and Sue Stump of Warsaw did some

preliminary research to see if a Big Brother/Big Sister agency could be started in Kosciusko County.

They went to the Kosciusko County court system and talked with Judge Robert Burner and several officers of the juvenile court who agreed there is a need and gave them encouragement.

Mrs. Stump talked with Robert Price, director of the Elkhart BB/BSA. He said there is a need in a county for an agency if 10 percent of the families in Kosciusko County are made up of single-parent families. According to the 1970 census, there were 750 single-parent families in the county. With a 20 percent increase in population in the decade following, this single-parent statistic has increased also.

Mr. Price said their goal is one of prevention. The courts want his program to help the troubled child, not the child in trouble.

Mrs. Stump also went as far as checking out the county's funding capabilities, finding professional people to serve on the board of directors and establishing office space.

According to the BB/BSA Development Process, fifty dollars must be sent to the national agency to acquire a "Feasibility Study," to be completed within six months. This study is designed to assist a community in obtaining pertinent information regarding its single-parent child population, the potential for financial assistance, the potential for volunteers and other forms of support for their community.

The next level would involve 400 dollars per year for the Agency-Information Level.

Mrs. Stump believes the initial stages can be self-supporting,

through private and service clubs' financial support. The future would then involve, hopefully, the United Way.

One half of the volunteers needed for the Board of Directors was found and office space was given at the new community center on North Park Street in Warsaw, close to the new daycare center. Mrs. Stump believes this location is important to her cause since it is a center for youth as well.

Then Mr. Kingston and Mrs. Stump's plans came to a standstill, waiting now for the next step.

What is next for Kosciusko County? We must have a well organized program, run by a skilled professional staff. Before a BB/BSA can be offered to children here we must establish a solid foundation. We need to have adequate support - enough volunteers, enough single-parent children, enough financial resources - to be able to maintain an agency at a level to be of substantial service to the youth it is designed to serve.

In conclusion, it seems to me, with the preliminary work done by several people in our county, the next step is spending \$50 for the "Feasibility Study" to find out if we can go any farther in obtaining an agency. Then we will have the proof needed to gain enough support to help the youth in our county.

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