

Elected Officials And Community Leaders Attend Niles Home's Legislative Breakfast

More than 50 community guests and elected officials recently gathered for a Legislative Breakfast hosted by the Niles Home for Children, Kansas City's oldest facility serving the needs of children and families in the urban core.

Co-hosted by Missouri State Senator Yvonne Wilson and Kansas State Senator David Haley, the breakfast provided an opportunity for dialogue about the issues facing residential therapeutic facilities, trends in foster care service, Niles' challenges, successes and service to the community and the impact of legislation pending in both State assemblies.

The event was held in the Library of Niles Prep, the behavioral management school located on the Niles Home campus.

Board President Michael Shaughnessy, of MetLife Financial Services, opened the forum and welcomed guests.

Niles President/CEO Valerie Nicholson-Watson introduced co-hosts Missouri State Senator Yvonne Wilson and Kansas State Senator David Haley and made opening remarks setting the stage for the discussion that followed.

"At Niles, our goal is to help children realize that they are important, that they matter and the we are here to give them the skills they need to move beyond the circumstances that brought them to us," said Ms. Watson.

"Ours are hefty goals, and we are not without challenges, most notably the changing needs of the children and families we serve," Ms. Watson said.

"The severity of the abuse, neglect and emotional issues faced by our children seem to be intensifying. Family stability, or instability, greatly affects our ability to prepare children to return to their home environment. The availability of foster and adoptive parents, especially those willing to adopt older kids, further impacts our ability to return children to a home setting," she added.

"There is a lot of uncertainty in our industry, not excluding here in our own states. Issues such as privatization, shorter lengths of stay, and stagnated service reimbursement rates create barriers to successful service delivery," Ms. Watson concluded.

Senator Wilson reminded the audience that these are very perilous times for the most vulnerable residents in our community. Acknowledging Niles' services to Kansas children. Senator Heley commented that the health and well being of children in residential treatment have no state boundaries.

Hickman Mills School board member John Sharp acknowledged the importance of the health levy and its impact on health service providers and recipients like those Niles serves.

Deb Herman, City Council member commented how their e-mails and voice mails are filled with messages, but not about these very important issues affecting our children and the underserved.

Alvin Brooks, Mayor Pro Tem, stated that while he was usually an optimist, lately he had become very worried about the state of the community and its ability to

reverse the seemingly downward trend of families torn apart by society's negative influences.

Other distinguished guests in attendance were Greg Porter, Aide to Senator Jim Talent; Craig Bland, Missouri State Representative; Greta Erhardt, Jackson County CASA; Derrick Willis, Division of Mental Health; Dot Coleman, Jackson County Mental Health Commission; Deborah Hervey, COMBAT; Rebecca Reece, Juvenile Court; Pam Miller and Sherita Bates, Division of Family Services; Pam Woodward and Harry Allison, Jackson County Children's Division; and Laura Jean Klapport, NCAAD.

Founded in 1883 by Samuel Eason, the Niles Home has served as a refuge for thousands of children, providing them with new hope, a new sense of direction, and a desire to make a positive contribution to society. In addition to residential services for children suffering from traumas associated with neglect, abuse or abandonment, Niles operates a state-certified alternative school for area students in grades K-9.

The agency also offers individual, group and family counseling; psychiatric evaluations/diagnoses; recreation therapy; Family Focus Program, Kinship Care support program, adolescent substance abuse treatment and prevention; and Summer Wellness enrichment Camp for 6 to 12 year olds.

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