

May 19, 2008

Chairmen Mundy and Hennessey

House Aging and Older Adult Services Committee

General Assembly of Pennsylvania

Dear Chairmen Mundy and Hennessey:

My name is John L. Green and I serve as Executive Director of the Southeast Kansas Area Agency on Aging in Chanute, Kansas. My reason for writing today is to applaud your efforts in proposing legislation to establish a senior mentoring program in the state of Pennsylvania. No issue is of more importance for America today as the issue of ensuring this country will maintain a viable, trainable, retainable workforce in the future as baby boomers exit the workforce in the next ten years.

In 1998 I wrote a grant proposal and submitted it to the Kansas Department on Aging with the premise that seniors with a successful background of living could teach younger workers the "soft skills" needed to succeed in today's workplace. At the time, employers were telling me they had no problem training younger workers in job specific skills but these same younger workers did not possess the generic life skills that most of us take for granted. Those skills included 1) punctuality, 2) good attendance, 3) the ability to add more value than you cost, 4) the ability to get along well with others, 5) the ability to maintain a functional family and 6) the ability to maintain a positive attitude and hope for the future.

Why did Kansas need a senior mentoring program? Why is Pennsylvania embracing mentoring? Looking back through America's history, we have always mentored our young most often through the family unit. Labor unions had apprenticeship programs, elders taught young people valuable lessons in our churches but somewhere along the line many of our young people have advanced to adulthood without the necessary knowledge and skills to survive. That's why House Bill 1743 is so crucial. It becomes more than just giving lip service to what we, the more fortunate, call the "American Dream." It becomes an issue of learning how to

dream, and realizing the effort and skills needed to achieve that dream. Our mission is to pass the torch to a new generation. We must not only convey wisdom, but more importantly, we must instill inspiration; for inspiration is the spark that ignites the soul to action. The mentor is the catalyst.

During the last 10 years administering the Mentoring Works program I have seen lives changed. And not only have the lives of young people been changed, I have seen retirees become impassioned about turning young people's lives around. Although the Mentoring Works program has changed over the years and we are performing many different types of mentoring, the one most important on which this program started was mentoring welfare-to-work clients and watching a light go on inside those individuals when they realize that they are significant. They realize that they do matter. That's when the flicker becomes a flame and hope is born. From there it becomes a matter of how to deal with life's challenges. But, the real change is that change in self-image that will be the spark that ignites their soul to action. That's what makes it all worthwhile. No one can tell the story better than someone who has been there. The following testimony was given by a young woman in Johnson County, Kansas about what Mentoring Works meant to her.

"It is a pleasure and an honor to be able to write this. I am trying to envision you, all seated together. If you are here today, you are employed. You have home and food on your tables. Some of you may have families, spouses and children. And if you do, none of you have ever thought, when my child grows up, circumstances could leave him alone, in despair, destitute or even homeless. And I wonder, when this happens, did these people ever dream it would happen to them? Can any of you say you know what it is like to live without dignity, self-respect and worst of all—hope? I cannot. But I can say I know what it feels like to walk that fine line between surviving and poverty. Close to the edge you find fear becomes your companion, with you all the time. I had a dark moment."

"My whole life I have been what I call 'beyond blessed.' I come from a loving home, with two devoted parents who put me, to this very day, above everything else. Loyal, loving friends surround me. I have a deep-rooted faith that sees me through all obstacles. I am college educated and held various positions in human services that really fulfilled my internal desire to

help others. I have healthy normal children. I could never want for more. Truly, life is good. However, sometimes life can throw you a curve ball and you really do not see it coming."

"My marriage failed. I found myself alone with children and too many bills. I lost my job. I could only find part-time jobs. It was the holiday season. All I could think about was My God; I am dragging my children into poverty. I am robbing them of a life like I had. I am sure by now you are thinking, what about those loving parents? Yes, they were there. They were more support than anyone could hope to have. I could not expect them to support my family even though they assisted more than I wanted them to. Pride is a funny thing. It is hard to reach out. It is embarrassing. It impacts the sense of dignity and self-respect. It feels like you are waving a red flag with the words, 'Hey, look at me I am a big loser. I cannot make it on my own.' I spiraled into a dark depression I did not think I could shake. I lost faith in myself. I began to believe that I was not capable of overcoming this obstacle before me. For the sake of my children I reached out."

"Along came Virginia... I have never forgotten meeting her for the first time. I marked it as the turning point in my life. I did not readily accept assistance. I watched her, listened to her speak more than once, and thought about what she said for some time before I made any moves. Change is a scary thing. It is hard to move forward, even if things are really bad. You are almost afraid that moving forward or in any direction could make your situation even worse. I have never regretted it. Virginia has become more than a mentor to me. She is now family. I have consulted Virginia on every aspect imaginable. I trust her. I know if she does not have the knowledge or experience in what I am asking, she will research and help me find solutions and answers. What better way to help someone than to empower them, to inspire confidence, to actively seek out solutions and to go forward, knowing things will only get better."

"It has been less than two years. With the help of my mentor, I found employment and reliable transportation. I am now a homeowner and recently promoted. I am thinking and planning for my retirement. I still worry about bills and money of course is tight, but I feel good about myself again. In all the places I turned for help, Virginia was the first person that looked me square in the eyes and told me I could do it. I am beyond blessed as I told you before. It feels good to be alive."

Would it not be great to have an angel as in "It's a Wonderful Life," and be able to see the impact we have on others? I hope Virginia truly knows the immeasurable debt of gratitude I feel towards her and this program. I am simply at a loss of words to tell her so. I do not want to even imagine what my life would have been like without her. I am telling you today, this is a program that has the power to profoundly impact the lives of others. I speak from experience. I am smiling all the time. Thank you for listening and thank you Virginia. Life is a miracle. Living is a thrill. Everyone should feel this way. "

Even though the Mentoring Works program did exceed all performance standards in the first two years of its grant funding, and has been able to sustain itself through a combination of private and public sector fee-for-service contracts over the past 10 years, the reason I am excited about mentoring being considered in Pennsylvania is: 1) it works and 2) it is the right thing to do. If you have any further questions about the Mentoring Works program please do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,

John L. Green

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