

## **Kids In need of Support and Services**

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### **Background:**

Herbert Hoover, the 31<sup>st</sup> President of the United States, is remembered for saying “Children are our most valuable resource.” Today, the children of Kosciusko County need us to live out this belief more than ever before. The children of this county are dealing with issues that were nonexistent just ten years ago. Poverty, addiction, mental health, and varied family structures are just some of the issues weighing on our youth today.

Besides what is happening inside the home; changing family dynamics, blended families and step families/siblings, our youth face tremendous pressures outside of the home as well: bullying, social media anxiety, self-esteem, and academic pressures are just a few of the daily battles our youth are facing. With so many needs on a variety of levels, it is time to create a source in which these needs can be referred to, identify the help needed, and intervene on behalf of the child.

### **Problem:**

Meeting the needs of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs is the basic foundation in order to improve the quality of life. As we see many times these needs are not being met for the betterment of the child or the connections to services are not there for school aged children.

Kosciusko County youth have the possibility of attending 4 local school districts: Warsaw Community Schools, Tippecanoe Valley School District, Whitko Community School District, and Wawasee Community School District. Within those

4 districts, on average, a 20% growth in the free and reduced lunch enrollment over the last 10 years has been documented. See figures below.

Corporation	Current Free/Reduced Rate	Increase in the last 10 years
Warsaw	48%	16%
Tippecanoe Valley	54.9%	24%
Wawasee	44.7%	16%
Whitko	45.1%	24%

(Source- IDOE <http://compass.doe.in.gov/dashboard/overview.aspx>)

Kosciusko county schools average 47% of the student population in the free and reduced category. These are students and families that could benefit from our county services. Although some families choose not to attend public schools and attend private schools, this trend may continue with in private schools in the county as well. Along the same line, the 2010 census results stated that 11.9 % of county residents live below the poverty level.(Census 2010) With these numbers, it is evident that there are a number of families and students in need of support or social services.

Currently, the county offers many services for families in need up to a particular age. As you see below, some of these services drop off at age 5 for children.

### **WIC Category Requirements in Indiana**

- **Women**
  - *During pregnancy and up to 6 weeks after the birth of an infant or the end of the pregnancy*
  - *Postpartum up to six months after the birth of the infant or the end of the pregnancy*
  - *Breastfeeding up to the infant's first birthday*
- **Infants**
  - *Up to the infant's first birthday*

- **Children**
  - *Up to the child's fifth birthday*  
(WIC Indiana website)

Who is left responsible to fill the gaps that these children and families may still need? This important task has been left to the school system and the community. As soon as a child can enter school, some of the social services that he/she has been receiving stop, or are shift to other resources. Families are left to figure out what to do next and the school is often the first line of defense in attending to the needs of these children. The first and most regular line of contact to identify children in need of services are school staff, youth organization leaders, and CASA volunteers. However, once they identify these needs where do they turn to see if a service is available, and then how do they provide access to the service?

The youth of today are encountering more and more obstacles throughout their childhood. These needs can be organized in the following ways: social/emotional, physical, and spiritual. Some of the social/emotional needs might be related to a break down in the family structure, an emotional feeling of self-worthlessness, the incarceration of a family member, or perhaps dealing with a family member who is struggling with addiction. Some of the physical needs that youth face can be the very basic of all physical needs: medical needs, physical hygiene, dental work, and even a need for food.

There is no doubt that for every need listed, there is an agency, an organization, an individual, or program that is available to service the need. The problem lies in how to get all of those services connected to the right children at the right time. For example, a school has one local contact for a child in need of a winter

coat, another contact for child in need of dental assistance, another contact for a child in need of outside counseling, and so on. The needs are great and this community has answered the call to each one of those needs. However, it can be quite cumbersome to manage the various degrees of needs and getting students matched with the right needs.

Also, many children in need have multiple needs. Gathering the right organizations to educate and care for the whole child has become nearly impossible. Within each organization or agency, there is a hierarchy of personnel, paperwork to fill out and file, contacts to be made, and checklists to be reviewed for the needs of service. This has created a break-down in being able to get our youth of today the services they so desperately need in a timely manner. Perhaps, if the right services are connected to the right child, needs can be met, parents can feel some reprieve, and families can rebuild prior to the need for the courts to get involved.

Currently, when social service inquiries are made the first step is to direct them to United Way 211, which is a good starting place. However, the process of utilizing 211 does not lend itself to non-family members (“outside the home source”) looking to help a child in need. When contacting 211 questions relating to household income, household budget, bills, medical demands and many other personalized questions are asked to determine what services might help those in need. For example, if an inquiry is made regarding needing medical assistance- if that that assistance is not available through a social service, 211 will find another service i.e. heating or food assistance, that can help alleviate budget constraints to allow room in the budget for the needed medical assistance. While this process does

provide an avenue for help, it is not user friendly to an “outside the home source” looking to provide assistance.

**Challenge:**

Our greatest challenge for our county today is to figure out the best way streamline the many organizations and agencies currently within our county so that one source can be used as a referring agent to the child and family for all needs that must be met. Schools, families, and agencies can benefit from the assistance and implementation of a KIDSS Community Coordinator for Kosciusko County. (Kids in Need of Services & Support)

**Solution:**

Creating and utilizing a KIDSS Community Coordinator will provide a voice for all children in the county. This position is designed to be a liaison between the school aged children the agency, and the family. A position funded through a grant either local, city or state level would allow for a KIDSS Community Coordinator to visit with the many agencies and organizations that currently exist within Kosciusko County for the wellbeing of our children. It is imperative for the coordinator to understand the role of the agency or service and for the advocate to develop a working relationship with the contact person.

One of the most important roles within the Community Coordinator job description would be the connection of the service to the individual in need. Whether that connection is made through contacting the family directly, working with the advocate, school counselor/nurse, CASA volunteer, or a social services program director, it is the role of the Community Coordinator to establish contact,

education, access assistance, and follow up to ensure that every effort possible is made to complete the connection for the child in need.

Creating a database of all of the agencies, organizations, and services available to families will be an ongoing purpose of the position. Through educational seminars provided by the Community Coordinator, the advocate would know the first place of exploration would be the database. Here, the community will find all the local links on one website, instead of researching each one individually. Quick links to activities, specialized services, and events will reduce the research time and greatly improve the connection time between the child and the service.

If a service is not listed in the database the advocate would then need to contact the Community Coordinator who, as a job duty, would perform further research, outreach, and establish the connections to determine if a service is available for the identified need, and then communicate back to the advocate.

Through the discovery process of new services, the Community Coordinator would then be able to update the database and provide universal access to the discovered service.

This database will be continuously updated and promoted to the schools and community. As the coordinator works with those service providers that currently exist, he/she can also note services that are needed but do not currently exist as well. The KIDSS Community Coordinator can begin seeking out other agencies or organizations who might be willing to take on the much needed service and compile that into the database as well.

In addition to maintaining the database, the Community Coordinator's responsibilities would include Community Service Education Seminars, provided through various avenues such as school staff education events, local youth organization directors, and church organizations, in addition to state and national based social service organizations. The presentation of the database with a tutorial, community awareness statistics presentation, feedback session of participants identifying needs, and concluding with question and answer session encompass a basic educational seminar presented by the Community Coordinator at least twice a year to key organizations within the community.

Educating the area schools will also be a critical component of success. Communicating the responsibilities and services that the KIDDS Community Coordinator can provide can be done through staff meetings, meeting with the administrators, a presentation on the first teacher workday of the school year, or conducting a meeting with all of the area guidance counselors and nurses. Information can also be posted on the school websites.

It will also be the responsibility of the coordinator to work to create even more connections between the school and students and families. He/she will work with local churches to connect their services to children and also other child advocacy groups or organizations centered on supported children. Communicating the need for the position is important. It will be even more important to communicate the purpose of the position, once it is created. A Community Coordinator is only useful if being used to advocate. In order for this position to be effective, it will be imperative for the position to be known

throughout the community. While this paper focuses mainly on the advocate working between the child, school, and agency, it is critical for the greater Kosciusko Community to understand the position and its importance.

This can be done in a variety of ways. One avenue would be to meet with families and community members at community events. Setting up a booth at Family Safety Day or introducing the program at little league and soccer events are great avenues for communicating the new service to parents and community members. It is the role of the KIDDS Community Coordinator to be present during First Fridays in downtown Warsaw and setting up a booth during the 4-H fair. In order for this position to make an impact, the public must be aware of it and support it.

A program currently in place at Goshen Community Schools was set up to bridge the gap between the Hispanic population and address the communication barrier with the school. This was a program of “parent liaisons” to communicate with the families for the betterment of the child’s education and to support the family’s needs. As the program developed, they realized that they could work together with a list of “parent liaisons” to assist families as they coordinated resources together to help each other as they saw needs. This program can be adapted and developed in Kosciusko County to reach out to those in need of help and assistance here in our own county.

## **Conclusion**

It is time to pull together as a community to serve the needs of our most vulnerable children. They are our future. It is critical to connect our kids in need of



services to the right organizations and agencies. By creating a KIDDS Community Coordinator, we are investing in our community's future, today. Time, dedication, persistence, and perseverance are all key aspects to connecting those in need to the social services, all of these qualities and skills will be concentrated with the establishment of a Community Coordinator whose primary function is to connect kids in need with social services.