



# WHAT'S WORKING

A Message from  
DJJ Director Andy Block

Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice

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## Meeting Basic Needs For 25 Years

### *“Friends Of The Court” Offer Hampton Roads Youth Tools For Success*

While the two “Friends Of The Court” agencies serving the cities of Portsmouth and Virginia Beach evolved differently over the last 25 years, the executive directors of both agree: They have helped many court-involved Hampton Roads-area youth succeed often just by providing the basics taken for granted by most families.

“You can’t expect kids to succeed if they don’t have their basic needs met,” says Diane Shelton, who has served as executive director of the Friends of the Virginia Beach Juvenile Court Inc. for five years. “We receive referrals from social workers, police officers, probation officers, schools and attorneys. The bulk of our mission is to make sure our youth have what they need. It can be clothes, lamps, blankets, toiletries, school supplies, whatever. I’m always on the lookout for donations.”

The idea for the Friends was first hatched in 1991 by Judy McReynolds, a probation officer also serving as a volunteer coordinator at CSU 2–Virginia Beach in 1991. “At that time, our kids were facing a lot of barriers that we realized could be solved, just



*Susan Fincke, executive director of Friends of the Portsmouth Juvenile Court, displays some of the clothing items she keeps handy at CSU 3–Portsmouth in case a youth might need them for a job interview.*

with a little help,” McReynolds says. “Staff was paying out of their own pockets for things like bus fares, khaki slacks for a job interview, birth certificate fees ... it was an ever-changing list of basic things.”

The creation of a formal organization allowed it to have fundraisers, and to focus community attention on the needs of the youth. Over the years, the Friends have helped where there is any kind of roadblock to success: fees to send kids to youth camps, home pest extermination, and even a wig for a girl who was mercilessly teased due to baldness caused by a medical condition.

Friends of the Portsmouth Juvenile Court Inc. began in 1993 in the basement of Brighton Rock AME Zion Church when a CSU 3–Portsmouth staff member was given release time to coordinate volunteers. The first executive director was hired in 1997.

The Portsmouth organization thrived through the 1990s and 2000s, with funding from the City of Portsmouth, supported by numerous grants, helping to launch new initiatives designed to meet the needs of court-involved youth. In recent years, a few “signature” fundraisers have generated the majority of individual donations,



Diane Shelton, left, executive director of Friends of the Virginia Beach Juvenile Court, presents a Virginia Beach parent with some much-needed cooking equipment and a set of dishes. The Friends also donated the sofa they are sitting on. “They’ve been really helpful to me,” the grateful parent says.

including “Pinwheels for Prevention” in April in observance of National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and “Dinner with Friends” in October.

“In 2014, for the first time we were able to apply for a grant from the local United Way,” Fincke says. “Churches and civic organizations also help out a great deal.”

Virginia Beach receives nearly all of its funding from private donations, helped along by the “Chili Cook-Off For Charity” for the last five years. Both organizations are 501(c)(3) non-profits, and each has a board of directors.

“Our program is set up almost like a university,” says Friends of the Portsmouth Juvenile Court Executive Director Susan Fincke. “There are different departments that specialize in certain areas, all of which ultimately help court-involved youth and their families.”

Funds in Portsmouth’s program are specifically earmarked for certain services. Fincke says about 40-45 percent goes to the Community Services Program, to which youth are assigned by the court to

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complete community service hours at local non-profits or municipal departments. The success rate has been high: In FY2016, 105 kids were ordered to perform 1,888 hours of community service, with 70 percent completing their commitments. So far in FY2017, 62 youth have performed 774 hours.

Another 40-45 percent supports the Portsmouth Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, which trains volunteers to investigate cases of youth in foster care to ensure their needs are being met. Volunteers receive 30 hours of training, which includes instructions on preparing a recommendation report for a judge. In FY2016, Portsmouth CASA served 80 youth in foster care.

The remaining funds pay for the Transportation Motivating Change program, which provides parents

a \$24 stipend that helps defray the cost of travel to visit their children.

Like Shelton, Fincke does her best to keep a supply of incentives handy to reward positive behavior. In addition to items such as snack foods, movie tickets, Norfolk Tides baseball tickets, and zoo and aquarium passes, Fincke uses a vacant corner of a closet at CSU 3–Portsmouth to store a variety of dress shirts, coats, neckties, shoes, and other clothing that will especially help youths looking to be well-dressed for job interviews. “I’m always visiting thrift stores to see what I can find,” Fincke says. Shelton has a similar “clothes closet” that was visited by more than 100 families last year.

Shelton and Fincke both rely on probation officers to decide who gets what. “They know the kids better than anyone,” Fincke says. CSU 3–Portsmouth Director Katherine Grimm agrees. “Susan is like a genie in a bottle in her ability to fulfill the wishes of our staff,” Grimm says. “The Portsmouth Friends is an essential partner for our CSU, helping us assist our families in the ways they need help.”

Shelton says her favorite part of the job is when she personally delivers items to families who need them. On a recent visit, she brought folding chairs and a collection of pots, pans and dishes to a parent who had just moved into an unfurnished apartment and needed some basic items to set up house.

“When there is a need in Virginia Beach, Diane contacts her dedicated volunteers and they always seem to find a way to meet it,” says CSU 2–Virginia Beach Director Olympiah Perkins. “The Friends are invaluable partners as we create an environment that encourages and rewards success.”