THE STAR DEMOCRAT

DSS sponsors daylong forum

By KENT SMITH
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DENTON — Social work professionals and partners filled tents outside the Carter Building on Thursday to learn more about how they can improve families.

Caroline County Department of Social Services sponsored their annual community event at the Carter Building, this year titled "Speaking in Harmony." Talks and panel discussions by some of state and local social work professionals combined a status report of how welfare has changed through its history and how reforms six years ago have changed the way families are helped.

Opening the morning's presentations were Department of Human Resources Chief of Staff Dale Webb and University of Maryland School of Social Work professor Catherine Born.

Born, the day's keynote speaker, is one of the nation's leaders in telling how welfare reform has helped families. She said the key to serving families are two basic but in-depth questions — what are the characteristics of the people served and what happens to them afterward? Those questions will keep social workers understanding the needs of each individual case and the family's plight.

"If we are to be successful, we simply must keep those two things in mind," Born said.

Partnerships have increased the number of people seen through social services programs despite a dramatic drop in people needing cash assistance. Caroline's cash assistance numbers have dropped 81 percent from 1,250 to 240 between January 1995 and 2000 with an average of 115 families a month in 2001. The state's drop is at 66 percent. Meanwhile more than 10,000 visits were made last year to the Caroline Job Center, a partnership with Caroline social services and the state Department of Human Resources.

"Some of this had to do with the great economic times," said Born. "Much of the change has come from what you have been doing inside DSS and outside its walls."

Welfare reform has allowed social service agencies the opportunities to try new programs and responses to help families, but adds extra responsibility on each person in the team. The responsibility also lasts longer as the tests to stay off cash assistance includes weathering family emergencies.

"Lasting success means more often than not we have to stick with their families after they leave cash assistance," Born said.

Even though cash assistance numbers are down, more can be done to respond to their needs. Nontraditional families, ones with the children's natural mother and father in the house, have doubled as traditional families have represented a majority of people helped in the last 3 1/2 years since welfare reform.

A second area is domestic violence, where social service workers have the tools to help, but victims are afraid to come forward. The third is fatherhood issues from child support to job training. Born said departments are increasing their help toward fathers in their effort to help the family.

Webb, an Easton native, has 30 years of state service in agencies that partner with county departments of Social Services, including Head Start director and assistant deputy secretary for the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulations.

Webb sees the Caroline County Department of Social Services as having vision and energy. A pin he wore symbolizes the relationships social service workers should have — the small dot being the employees, the medium dot the partners and the large dot being the community and the customers who are served. Caroline's department has changed with the times, and that adaptation has made other counties take notice.

Following the two speakers, panel discussions were set up for the roles and responsibilities of fathers, new ways to heal families and ways to stem family violence.

Photos by KENT SMITH

Catherine Born, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, makes the keynote address Thursday at Speaking in Harmony, a half-day conference for Caroline County Department of Social Services and its partners.

Dale Webb, Maryland Department of Human Resources chief of staff, gives opening remarks Thursday at Speaking in Harmony.