

April 13, 2004

MENTORSHIP PROGRAM LINKS ADULTS WITH CHILDREN OF JAILED PARENTS

**By Bill Bishop
The Register-Guard**

With a three-year federal grant and fingers crossed that some adult volunteers will step up, a Eugene-based nonprofit group is gearing up to help 100 local children cope with the emotional trauma that comes when a parent goes to prison.

The TRUE Friends program is the newest mentorship effort in the 13-year history of Committed Partners for Youth, so new volunteers can count on getting training and support from a time-tested staff, agency Executive Director Susan Walsh said.

The idea is to help fill the emotional void and to counteract negative feelings children have when separated from a parent who is in prison.

"There is a lot of secrecy and isolation," Walsh said. "The mentors will be there to spend time with them and accompany them to different activities in town. This is an exciting new program for us."

Separation from a parent often leads to anxiety, withdrawal, depression, shame, guilt and anger, she said.

The feelings are even more intense when the parent is in prison, she said.

"The grief and loss cycle is constant and continual with each visit to the parent, with each letter and phone call," Walsh said. "It's not surprising that these children are at an exceptional risk for failure."

Oregon Youth Authority data show 71 percent of girls and 54 percent of boys in state youth prisons have a family member in jail or prison.

Volunteers need not be clinicians, therapists or counselors, she said - just adults willing to devote time to help a child by being there and having fun.

Through partnerships with local businesses and social service agencies, Committed Partners for Youth collaborates to provide admission to fitness centers, athletic events, movies and other events for its clients and adult mentors.

The agency pairs mentors with young people based on common interests and personal

qualities. Mentors are trained and encouraged to help children discover and develop their own interests.

The Committed Partners for Youth staff is linked closely with the Relief Nursery, the Oregon Social Learning Center, the Center for Family Development and the Lane Council of Governments to provide at-risk children in the TRUE Friends program with professional support services. The services are designed to counteract emotional and social forces that may lead them to destructive behavior.

The TRUE Friends program - short for Together building Resiliency, Understanding and Empowerment - already has matched two high school-age youths with adult mentors. Elementary schoolchildren are being identified as potential clients this month.

Under the \$225,000 federal grant and a \$24,000 gift from the estate of Ruth F. Jackson, the TRUE Friends program will match children ages 4 to 15 with 30 mentors in each of the first two years and 40 mentors in the third year, Walsh said.

With a \$5,000 grant from Wells Fargo, Committed Partners for Youth is conducting a recruiting drive for new mentors - particularly for men, bilingual adults and Latinos, she said.

The local organization is one of 52 nonprofit agencies nationwide to win grants for children of incarcerated parents from the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

CALL FOR MENTORS

Who: Adults - particularly men, bilingual speakers and Latinos - willing to commit 15 hours per month for one year, attend five hours of training and maintain contact with agency staff

Information: Committed Partners for Youth, 344-0833 ext. 103 or www.committedpartners.org