

Community building teams share ideas

Tabatha Beerbower



Terry Woodbury, president of Kansas Communities, LLC, discusses progress in reaching goals and resources with community building action teams and conveners Tuesday evening at First Baptist Church. The meeting allowed conveners and teams to meet and share ideas.

Tribune writer

Conveners and other members of the five community building action teams gathered to share progress and ideas Tuesday evening at First Baptist Church.

Chanute residents started discussing community strengths and areas of improvement with Terry Woodbury, president of Kansas Communities, LLC, last July. After community conversations, action teams formed to meet the needs of various sectors.

Teams sat at round tables to share their progress since their formation this winter.

The first team to share is focusing on building pride and self-esteem in youth through multi-generational cooperative programs of volunteer service and mentoring.

Margaret Bideau, multi-generational team member and co-coordinator for YouthFriends, announced success with that mentoring program in its first year at Alcott, and plans for expansion to other schools in Chanute.

Currently YouthFriends has 20 volunteers, six of which are high school students. Volunteers apply, are screened and trained, and spend time with students on school grounds.

"The kids love it," Bideau said. "The volunteers feel rewarded. The teachers have noticed a big difference in the classrooms."

The general consensus from the action team was that children need caring adults and the team is encouraging more volunteers to join YouthFriends.

Steve Slane, who will be teaching at Royster next year, said the majority of the volunteers so far have been female. He said the team will visit civic organizations this summer in an effort to encourage more male volunteers.

The group did not only focus on mentoring children, but turned its attention on how to link children to seniors.

Patty Allen, director of Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, said the team would like to encourage more seniors to volunteer in schools and for school age children to create relationships with seniors in care facilities. The team suggested schools adopting care facilities or initiating pen pal or birthday card programs.

Brenda Krumm, dean of outreach and work force development, Neosho County Community College, did not attend the meeting Tuesday, but as a part of the multi-generational team, she has initiated visits with daycare children to care facilities.

Marilyn Harms, director of the FireEscape CoffeeHouse, gave an overview of information for the team she is working with, which focuses on developing education and job opportunities for young adults.

Harms said the team wants to improve the education of students, whether they want to stay in Chanute or not. The team felt that young adults in the community need the opportunity to learn vocational and life skills.

This goal has started to be addressed by the start of the Industrial Certificate program at NCCC, where Chanute residents can complete night vocational courses.

To add to that effort, Leroy Chard, Chanute vice mayor, suggested recruiting volunteers to spend time with young adults while teaching skills. He offered to bring a car to the FireEscape to teach young adults how to change their oil or a tire.

Harms said the group is still gathering information and resources, but has made NCCC packets available to young adults at the FireEscape and several have enrolled for next year.

Ed Cox, mayor, spoke for the third team, focused on enhancing technology and attracting higher technological jobs to diversify Chanute's employment base.

Cox said Chanute has already met one of the team's goals, to provide high speed network communications to the community, which has been updated to an ultra-high speed connection. The team spoke about continuing with the goal of aggregating T-1 lines for business and industries and not standing in the way for businesses and industry to join the city-wide network.

Members of the team also traveled to surrounding communities to seek out technological ideas that could be utilized in Chanute.

Rick Willis, manager of Chanute data processing, and other members visited a Business and Technology Innovation Center in Joplin. The center is an incubator program designed to accelerate the growth of entrepreneurial companies through business support resources and services.

"It offers services that a little business just getting started can't always afford," Willis said.

Willis told the conveners that new businesses have only a 20 percent chance of surviving their first year, but that increases to 80 percent inside an incubator program.

The team discussed the possibility of setting up a center in the Safari Industrial Park.

Christian Watkins, Chanute High School senior, spoke for the fourth team focusing on increasing and expanding youth involvement in the community.

This team also was in the process of gathering information and resources, but Watkins said they needed to focus on after school programs.

The team sent out surveys to middle school students and found that students want a safe place after school to hang out with friends and have unstructured physical activity. The team plans to create a focus group for middle school students and to work with the Recreation Department to unite organizations and programs.

Tim Fairchild, city commissioner, spoke for the last team, focusing on neighborhoods at risk. The team is implementing a neighborhood watch program in the rehabilitation grant area, 7th to 14th Street, from Lafayette and Garfield avenues. The group also plans to focus on neighborhood clean-up, possibly recruiting extra citizen help during the city's clean-up week in October.

Woodbury told the group that this meeting was a chance for communication among citizens who have taken ownership of community issues and to open doors to learn from each other.

Teams will continue with their efforts and with recruiting more community members to become involved.

Woodbury said the next step in the community building process will be another large community conversation to bring to light what the teams' work.

Before adjourning, Fairchild wanted to leave the group with something to think about. He noted that some of the goals the teams were trying to accomplish were not easy, but to remember perseverance. "Never, never, never quit," he said. "We'll change the world on this little part of the planet."

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