

From the St. Petersburg Times:

He wants to help troubled families

Bill Maxwell, Editorial Columnist

For many Tampa Bay area families, the boom years have brought prosperity and happiness. For hundreds of others, however, matters have not gone so well. Consider some of the statistics from a study done by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida:

- 54,665 Florida children were in divorced families. Of that number, 4,040 were in Hillsborough County, 1,942 were in Pinellas and 1,010 were in Pasco. Experts say that the numbers have not improved.
- At the same time, 52,896 children ran away from home: 5,138 in Hillsborough, 5,616 in Pinellas, and 1,891 in Pasco.

For reasons unknown to state government agencies, many families are not getting the help they need and deserve. Churches and volunteer civic and social groups are overwhelmed by demand. Crises pile up, and these families fall apart.

Here is where people such as W. Ward Cox, founder of the nonprofit For The Family, Inc., must play a central role in compensating for what other organizations fail to do. Cox's vision is ambitious but attainable if he can get adequate funding and does not try to accomplish too much too fast.

For The Family focuses on two main objectives. The first is resolving family dilemmas before they escalate into what he calls "negative outcomes." The second is reinforcing a sense of community through a network of organizations that understand the importance of the family and their unique helping role.

"Personal problems within troubled families often worsen to the point where drastic measures are necessary to repair the damage, which can include violence and other tragic outcomes," said Cox, former resource development coordinator for the Family Service Association of Greater Tampa, Inc. "By then, the response is expensive and frequently ineffective. Unfortunately, families find it difficult to focus on solving these dilemmas because progressively less time exists to deal with them. If families cannot find adequate solutions, the cumulative damage is also felt on a community-wide scale."

With Cox as its only paid employee, For the Family uses lay and expert volunteers, called Mentors, to counsel troubled families, called Associates, by telephone. The referral network enables families to cope with problems through advice from other families that have weathered a similar challenge.

The service is free of charge. Mentors and Associates are located by affiliates such as churches, community centers, civic groups and even government agencies, and Cox then matches them based on needs and expertise.

Social service workers agree with Cox that many families do not get help because the various resources in the community do not coordinate their efforts.

For The Family attempts to fill that gap by serving as a bridge between the disparate organizations to advise families.

“A strong correlation exists between family discord and our declining sense of community and vice-versa,” Cox said. “This trend seriously threatens the quality of family life as a whole, not simply among those most directly affected. Community service organizations that work selflessly to fulfill human needs often are unable to spend the time they would like in identifying areas of shared interest because of the operational challenges they face.”

Although For The Family’s annual budget is modest, its biggest hurdle is fundraising. Cox has received donations from several prominent businesses and private citizens. Anyone interested in more information about For The Family may telephone Cox at (813) 653-5239 or write the agency at P.O. Box 15884, Tampa, FL 33684-5884.