

# Introducing Safe Families



THE NEWSLETTER OF STRONG COMMUNITIES

# Keep Kids Safe

Many families in our communities face difficult situations that can quickly turn into a crisis if the supports and resources needed by the family are not readily available to them. Unexpected loss of employment, incarceration of a parent, and serious illness of a family member are just a few of the crushing situations faced by families in our communities every day. These circumstances, and many others, can lead to increased isolation and exclusion from community life. During these times, when a family faces seemingly insurmountable obstacles, parents are less able to provide the care their children need.

Past generations could rely on extended family and long-time friends to step in during times of distress and crisis to offer material supports and assistance in caring for the children. However, in our highly mobile society, many families do not have

these types of supports readily available. During these times of extreme stress, children are especially at risk for abuse and neglect as their parents struggle to put the pieces of their lives and families back together.

STRONG COMMUNITIES would like to provide an alternative option to families in crisis through a program called Safe Families. When families lack a strong informal support system, a Safe Families partnership can offer periods of respite and, in effect, an extended family that can offer the needed support and provide a safe haven for the children.

Safe Families will provide an alternative to the current child welfare system by seeking volunteer families to provide *supplementary care* within the context of a cooperative relationship with the natural family, rather than *substitute care* as is the

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*The vision of STRONG COMMUNITIES is for every child and every parent to be confident that someone will notice and someone will care whenever they have cause for joy, sorrow, or worry. You play a role in making this vision a reality in your community.*

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### Interested in getting involved?



Look for the star inside to find ways you can volunteer to support STRONG COMMUNITIES.

We want to hear your comments and suggestions about our newsletter. Please direct them to our editor at [strongcommunities@clemson.edu](mailto:strongcommunities@clemson.edu) or call 864-688-2247.

# Leaving No Families Outside 2008

There are families in our communities that live lives of isolation, excluded from the groups or places where they might receive much needed support. This exclusion is not always intentional on the part of others. Often the families themselves are reluctant to seek involvement because of their own personal circumstances. Cultural barriers, feelings of shame regarding the families economic status or the incarceration of a family member, fear of various types of discrimination, even lack of time for community involvement because of family responsibilities can all create barriers to meaningful connection to the community. Regardless of the reason for the isolation, it is imperative to the well-being of children that others intentionally seek out families and draw them into community where they can find the supports we all need.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. It is a time for all adults to rededicate themselves, as the U. S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect urged, “to know, watch, and support their neighbors’ children and to offer help when needed to their neighbors’ families.” It is a time to



David Anderson, executive director of Lydia Home in Chicago

be intentional about *Leaving No Families Outside*.

In preparation for April and, more specifically, Blue Ribbon Sabbath observances, STRONG COMMUNITIES hosted a luncheon on February 19 for leaders, staff and involved lay persons from faith communities across our service area. The purpose of the luncheon was threefold:

1. to introduce the idea of Safe Families;
2. to highlight ways faith communities are already involved in efforts to “Keep Kids Safe” through the

- Building Dreams initiative and partnerships to sponsor STRONG COMMUNITIES’ Family Activity Centers, and
3. to challenge faith communities to agree to begin or deepen their commitment to provide ongoing support to families.

Our keynote speaker for the event was Dr. David Anderson, executive director of Lydia Home Association in Chicago and founder of Safe Families. He spoke about the important call to “biblical hospitality” and the significant role of faith communities in assuring hospitality is offered to those families struggling on the margins of our communities. He also provided information about the history of and principles behind Safe Families. Dr. Anderson described Safe Families as an avenue to “unleash unprecedented levels of compassion on our community through our own homes and our own families.”

In addition to being introduced to Safe Families, attendees were provided with an overview of “What’s So Special About STRONG COMMUNITIES for Children?” by Dr. Andrew Billingsley, Professor of Sociology and African-American Studies at the  
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Representatives from local churches and STRONG COMMUNITIES staff enjoy fellowship over lunch.



Dr. Andrew Billingsley, professor at the University of South Carolina, and Rev. Dr. David Taylor, co-pastor of Eastminster Presbyterian Church and co-chair of the Clemson Community Fellows

# April 20, 2008 – Blue Ribbon Sabbath

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During April (Child Abuse Prevention Month), many people wear or display blue ribbons to symbolize their promise to join in a community effort to protect children. In spring 1989, Bonnie Finney, a grandmother in Virginia, began this custom in memory of her grandson, who died as a result of abuse. She used the blue ribbon as a symbol of her own dedication to ensuring that no child would be bruised by physical abuse, exploitation, or neglect.

Blue Ribbon Sabbath presents a special opportunity during the month of April for faith-based organizations to renew the commitment to Keep Kids Safe. In addition to distributing STRONG COMMUNITIES' bulletin inserts and blue ribbons, the minister's sermon can focus on God's love for children, parents' God-given privilege to care for their children, and the responsibility of community members to care for each other,

especially all families with young children.

Churches may also choose this day to host other special observances. Consider honoring members of the church who are leaders in support for families in the congregation and the community or hosting a potluck luncheon after the morning service for families to have a time to meet and get to know one another. Another option would be to include a brief presentation during the service about the history and purpose of Blue Ribbon Sabbath and the possibilities for follow up.

Blue Ribbon Sabbath is a time to remember the children who suffer assaults or experience deprivation that hinders healthy development. It is also a time to celebrate parents and other family members, teachers at school and church, and others in the community who give special care to children and nurture them as they grow. Perhaps most importantly, it is a time for

commitment when we can all rededicate ourselves to safeguarding the children in our midst. We also must commit to make support for all parents and other caregivers in the wider community a part of the daily life of our communities.



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## How Can You Make a Difference?



Child Abuse Prevention Month, observed during the month of April, is a good time for communities to launch projects to provide ongoing support to families. Often these projects require the combined energies and resources of multiple community partners. To achieve the goal of assuring the needed supports are available for all families, there must be a collaborative effort among communities of faith, businesses, civic organizations and individual community members to work together toward a community goal to **"Keep Kids Safe"**.

Examples of such projects include:

- Collaboration with STRONG COMMUNITIES in building Safe Families, an alternative to the formal foster care system.
- Agreement to coordinate a host site for Building Dreams, a mentoring program for children of prisoners.
- Development of a Family Activity Center that would provide ongoing family activities and support for families with young children within the local community.

Examples of ways that individuals can be involved include:

- Providing a temporary home to a child whose family is in crisis.
- Providing material support to another family offering such shelter or to the child's biological family.
- Helping the family of a prison inmate.
- Hosting parent-child activities or playgroups.

For more information about these or other volunteer opportunities with STRONG COMMUNITIES, please contact our volunteer coordinator at (864)688-2247.

# Clemson Community Fellows: *Moving Our Mission Forward*

by Tom Charles

Clemson Community Fellows are leaders selected to promote STRONG COMMUNITIES' goal of keeping kids safe by enhancing family support. In pursuit of this goal, the Fellows began to plan their activities in groups divided by geography (east and west).

Each group focused discussions on the need to improve the lives of families on the margins of the community who have young children. Recognizing, however, the distinct needs of various communities, the groups are using different strategies to strengthen family support.

The **Riley Community Fellows** come from towns and unincorporated communities extending from Gantt to Williamston. The Fellows have emphasized the need to build a sense of community across the area. They started from the premise that the needs of individual families for connection to a community are more similar than different, regardless of local characteristics. To illustrate this point, the Fellows are planning to produce a book that will include local stories highlighting the elements of a strong community for children.

The **Golden Strip Fellows** are working in the more densely populated southeastern suburbs of Greenville County. Early in their work, the Fellows were moved by the plight of children whose parents are incarcerated.

Much of their work will concentrate on increasing the capacity of the Building Dreams initiative of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life. Building Dreams provides mentors for children whose parents are incarcerated. In addition, they recognized the need to broaden their efforts to increase the material support for families as a whole. The Fellows saw that this effort was a part of a broader charge to build a wider web of support in communities where families may not face such immediate and drastic challenges.

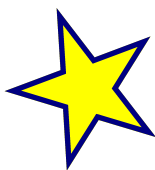
In an effort to increase this broader support for families, the Golden Strip Community Fellows developed a plan to increase the level of participation in Blue Ribbon Sabbath. Despite excellent participation in Blue Ribbon Sabbath in previous years, there is a sense that we are merely scratching the surface of the potential for

involvement of communities of faith.

The Fellows in both areas are tapping into their personal networks to encourage congregations' commitment to keep kids safe. They are encouraging congregations not just to have a one-day observance in April but instead to initiate ongoing service to families. For example, faith communities are being asked to join in providing mentors for children whose parents are incarcerated and partners for families in crisis whose children may need temporary care and shelter. Congregations are also being encouraged to increase support (for example, Parents' Nights Out) to all families with young children.

Toward those ends, many of the Fellows have pledged to extend their own service beyond the academic year to which they initially committed. Such leadership and sustained commitment are critical to building communities in which it is 'natural' to notice and care for children and parents experiencing joy, fear, or sorrow.

## CLEMSON COMMUNITY FELLOWS



The success of the leadership provided through the Clemson Community Fellows relies heavily on the continued support of committed volunteers. If you would like to contribute to the book project being coordinated by the Riley Community Fellows or if your interest lies in the areas of one-on-one mentoring of children or building broader family support as planned by the Golden Strip Community Fellows, please contact us.

For information about general volunteer opportunities with Strong Communities, please contact Lori Bailey at (864)688-2247. For more information about the Clemson Community Fellows or the activities they have planned, please contact Tom Charles at (864)688-2246.

## Introducing Safe Families (continued from page 1)

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option with our current foster care system. Developed by a faith-based organization in Chicago and now being implemented in Georgia, Safe Families has proven to be a means of assuring that children are safe at times when families are vulnerable.

Rooted in the idea of providing true hospitality to families who may otherwise be excluded from community, Safe Families will build a network of volunteers who open their homes to children whose families are in crisis. Parents may voluntarily seek the help of partner families and still maintain custody of their children. They are encouraged

to remain actively involved in their children's lives and to participate in decisions about their care (including decisions about when the children will return to their parents' homes). Even after the child goes home, the partner family may remain involved by providing ongoing support and friendship.

Under this model of community support for families, partner families are volunteers and do not receive any reimbursement for their time or expenses. Other families or organizations who are not in a position to provide direct care may help by providing resources to

meet the practical needs of either the natural family or the partner families.

The South Carolina Department of Social Services has agreed to provide financial support for professional assistance to families in the program. Staff from STRONG COMMUNITIES will provide training and ongoing support to the families involved in this program and assistance to faith-based organizations and other civic or community groups that agree to partner with us to support this initiative.

**For more information about Safe Families, contact STRONG COMMUNITIES at 864-688-2247.**

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## Leaving No Families Outside 2008 (continued from page 2)

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University of South Carolina. He outlined the vision of STRONG COMMUNITIES and its unique successes thus far toward the goal to "Keep Kids Safe."

The participants were also challenged to prepare for Blue Ribbon Sabbath and beyond by considering ways that they and their congregations could partner with STRONG COMMUNITIES to further the message of *Leaving No Families*

*Outside*. The challenge is conceptualized in three concrete goals for congregations of faith: get the message out; commit to a deeper level of involvement; and take the vision to the wider community. STRONG COMMUNITIES is committed to supporting congregations of faith in reaching a goal of adding ten new volunteers in support of Building Dreams or Safe Families.

Families struggling on the margins of our communities often feel isolated and excluded. This April we celebrate the families of faith and the individuals within congregations who are committed to the goal of *Leaving No Families Outside*.

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### Did You Know...

You will now be hearing from us more often. Beginning with this publication, "KEEP KIDS SAFE: The Newsletter of STRONG COMMUNITIES" will now be arriving at your door every two months. We hope this increase in newsletter publications will keep you better informed of the happenings in STRONG COMMUNITIES.

We will also now be including a STRONG COMMUNITIES Family Activity Center calendar with your newsletter. We hope this will help to keep you better informed of all the activities being sponsored by STRONG COMMUNITIES in southern Greenville County and adjoining communities. If you would like more information about an activity included in the calendar, if you wish to reserve your spot at an event, or if you are interested in serving as a volunteer to support an activity, please contact us. We hope to see you soon at one of these STRONG COMMUNITIES activities!



## ***Keep Kids Safe***

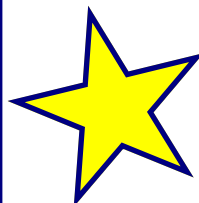
THE NEWSLETTER OF STRONG  
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**STRONG COMMUNITIES** seeks to build systems of support for families of young children in southern Greenville, eastern Anderson, and southern Laurens counties in Upstate South Carolina. Principally supported by a grant from The Duke Endowment, the initiative is designed to give new strength to application of the Golden Rule in communities as they care for their youngest members.

**STRONG COMMUNITIES** is based on the premise that for children to be safe and families to be strong, they must be able to count on others' noticing their needs and reaching out to help. A community effort to incorporate family support into the everyday life of neighborhoods where children live, study, and play will not only increase child safety, but will also enhance neighborhood quality of life, strengthen family well-being, and facilitate children's healthy development and readiness for school.



## **Volunteers make a difference in STRONG COMMUNITIES.**

**STRONG COMMUNITIES** is available to help you initiate or expand projects that serve children and families. We are happy to provide resource information and ongoing assistance regarding one of the ideas found in this newsletter, or we can work with you to determine project ideas tailored to your unique interests and talents.

Please contact us for more information.

**Lori Bailey, Volunteer Coordinator**  
**Phone: 864.688.2247**  
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