

What's different about Strong Communities?

- **Strong Communities** starts from the premise that, to be effective, *child protection must be a part of everyday life*. Therefore, safety for children requires the development of new norms of reciprocal help for families and watchfulness for children. By its nature, it requires collective action to ensure that every child — indeed, every parent — knows that someone will notice and someone will care whenever the child or family has reason to celebrate, grieve, or worry.
- Perhaps more than any previous initiative, **Strong Communities** *is designed to mobilize the entire community in keeping kids safe*. Unlike most of the comprehensive community initiatives to prevent child abuse and neglect, our strategy is to build *community* itself, not merely to foster *collaboration* among community organizations. To our knowledge, **Strong Communities** is the first effort fully to implement the *Neighbors Helping Neighbors* strategy proposed by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1993.
- Accordingly, although human service agencies make important contributions to people in need, they are not the primary actors in **Strong Communities**. Instead, *we are making help “natural” in the institutions of everyday life*: businesses, churches and other religious fellowships, civic clubs, fire departments, municipal governments, neighborhood associations, pediatric and family health clinics, police departments, schools, and YMCAs and other family centers.
- *We are also seeking thousands of volunteers to facilitate this mobilization and to provide direct support to families of young children*. Combining these efforts with those of parent educators and family support workers in the School District of Greenville County and the Piedmont Center for Mental Health, *we strive to make a support person available to every family of a child under 6 in southern Greenville County that desires such help*.
- Child abuse and neglect typically occur when parents and other caregivers are alone and so lacking in social and material resources that they feel overwhelmed—so overwhelmed that they lack the energy for adequate child care or that they lash out. Therefore, *we are attempting to increase both the social and the economic wealth of families*.
- For neighbors to help neighbors, there must be a community norm of mutual assistance, community institutions must be designed so that it is easy to notice and respond when there is a need for help, and people who have relatively large resources must be a part of the picture, not just those with the greatest need. Therefore, **Strong Communities** *takes a universal approach*. For example, we are working to make occasional child care (e.g., drop-in care

when there is a family emergency or simply a need for parents to take a break) easily available to all families, not just those who are most troubled or disadvantaged.

- Parental care and mutual help are greatest when parents believe that others will support them when they need help and that they themselves can make a difference in their communities. Accordingly, *a principal focus of **Strong Communities** is on building parent leadership.* For example, family support workers are assigned to develop such opportunities for families of children in 4-year-old kindergarten classes. Similarly, we are transforming well child care to bring families together and to facilitate fathers' involvement.
- All of these objectives are challenging in an era in which there is increasing alienation, isolation, and distrust, especially among young people. Hence, *the overriding principle of **Strong Communities** is the need to strengthen connections among families.*
- We are committed to learn how to do such broad-based change, to understand how to apply our principles in diverse natural settings, and to share such knowledge with colleagues elsewhere in South Carolina and the nation. Therefore, *we have an extensive program of process and outcome evaluation, and we are relying on both mass media and personal contacts to educate others about ways to **build strong communities to keep kids safe.***
- In that regard, **Strong Communities** *provides an excellent model because of the diversity of the communities that it serves:* urban, suburban, small-town, and rural; wealthy, middle-class, and disadvantaged.
- Recognizing that a community-wide increase in children's safety is a major, long-term task, *The Duke Endowment has provided generous long-term support* — five million dollars for four years (2002-2005), with the plan for support to continue for a decade (six more years).

What difference will Strong Communities make?

- *The personal security of children is a fundamental community responsibility.* Reasonable people can disagree about the public's interest in services to enrich the well-being of children and families, but no one can reasonably argue with the premise that the community has a duty to ensure the safety of dependent children. **Strong Communities** is designed to maximize the effectiveness of such efforts and to ensure their application to all children in the community.
- *Increased connections among people are likely generally to enhance perceived quality of life and to build a stronger sense of community.* The activities of **Strong Communities** are making southern Greenville County a better place to live — a good thing in itself.
- *Increased parent participation results in improved student performance and family satisfaction.*
- *Increases in community support for families and, therefore, in parents' belief that they can protect their children and strengthen their communities may result in reductions not only of child abuse and neglect but also of other problems of child development and family life.*