



Let's save programs that save our kids

By Gail Buckner

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“Penny wise and pound foolish” will describe our state government if the Appalachian Wilderness Program in Cleveland and the Roosevelt Wilderness Camp in Warm Springs are closed.

Every state department budget has been cut due to the ongoing recession. However, the fact that both programs have been whittled down from a couple hundred troubled youth to less than a couple dozen students is enough evidence to most observers that Georgia's Department of Human Resources, the previous administrator of these programs, and now the Department of Behavioral Health, has lost touch with another sage saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

These residential behavior modification programs are also known as the Georgia Outdoor Therapeutic Program. The youth who are placed there are considered in need of maximum care or intervention. Many of their services are patterned after Father Flannigan's Boys Town. The social skills training and school structure are a direct replication of that notable program.

The five basic social skills that are the first priority and focus for the boys are following instructions, cooperating with others, accepting consequences and criticism, communicating honestly and following rules.

OTP has a 70 percent success rate in redirecting the lives of youths in crisis. Some are boys from good homes who have gotten off track during their teenage growing pains. Other participants have come from situations of neglect and abuse. All have been referred to the program by either a Juvenile Court or the Department of Family and Children Services and they come from throughout the state.

The boys learn life skills that will enable them to become successful adults. They learn to deal with anger. If another youth is causing a problem, the boys call “group” and discuss their issues and develop a plan to change the circumstances.

Home visitations and telephone time are privileges that are earned. The boys are physically challenged by chopping the firewood that will be used to heat their hut in the winter. They learn responsibility by taking turns stoking the nighttime fires, cooking for their group, washing dishes and carrying the daily supplies for their colleagues. Lights are out at 10 p.m. and everyone is up at 6 a.m. There are no televisions, iPods or computer games.

The youths in these programs will not thrive in a traditional school setting. Without the intense intervention that they would receive at OTP, many will be a distraction in the classrooms of local school

systems. How do we determine a dollar amount needed to deal with classroom disruptions and the time taken from other students? Closing these programs will cost more deeply in the long run.

Dozens of parents and grandparents of OTP graduates have called me to express disappointment that the state is considering closing these programs. Several have even stated that they doubt that their sons or grandsons would be alive today had it not been for OTP. All are willing to accept that we are living in serious budget times, but none understand the lack of prioritizing these cuts in ways that preserve a successful program like OTP.

For example, I have just received a notice that the press conference room for legislators will be closed for a few days because new drapes are being added and a microphone is being hung from the ceiling. Please tell me this isn't so. Don't take away the services for our children and then purchase unnecessary decorative objects for legislators.

To save this critical program, it will take the commitment of elected officials, government leaders, caring citizens and good corporate partners. This effort is worth our support. After all, what we're really talking about are Georgia's future citizens, our future work force and the parents of our next generation.

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