

THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Montgomery County officials, business leaders tout home visits for at-risk families

By Jay R. Jordan, jjordan@hcnonline.com Published 9:18 pm, Tuesday, May 30, 2017
Photos: Michael Minasi, Staff Photographer



Montgomery County Attorney J D Lambright



Officials gather for a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.



Joseph McMahan, Council for a Strong America's Texas State Director, speaks during a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.



Julie Crowe, DePelchin Children's Center Vice President of Prevention and Early Intervention Services, speaks during a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.



Montgomery County Sheriff Rand Henderson speaks during a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.



Toto Energy COO Todd Blackford speaks during a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.



David Skala, Moody National Bank Senior Vice President of Commercial Lending, during a press conference on the home visitor program in Montgomery County on Tuesday, May 30, 2017, at the Alan B. Sadler Commissioners Court Building in Conroe.

Public officials from the law enforcement and business communities in Montgomery County gathered Tuesday to address the importance of professional home visits to at-risk families. The act of home visiting, annotated federally as Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), is a program designed to allow nurses and social workers to step into homes where families are facing difficult circumstances – poverty, single parenthood, unemployment, etc. – to help the family get on its feet again. The workers are not a part of any investigative agency, such as Child Protective Services, and are strictly in the families' lives to help them.

Council for a Strong America is a national group that lobbies state legislatures and Congress to provide funding for MIECHV, a financial obligation that is essentially split 50/50 between states and the federal government. The council works with local child advocacy centers in 10 states, including Texas, to help coordinate that funding.

Here in Montgomery County, one of the home visit providers is Houston-based DePelchin Children's Center. Julie Crowe, who is DePelchin's vice president of prevention and early intervention, said the process of getting their representatives into the homes of families in need starts with a referral from pediatricians, daycare centers and others who are in contact with the family. "It's different than parents going to a parenting class," Crowe said. "This is a whole different ball game in their home, in their environment, working with them individually on their goals."

The initial contact with the family helps the caseworkers understand the unique circumstances surrounding the family's misfortune, whether it's criminal, economic or environmental factors affecting the family's well-being. After that first meeting, the caseworkers help develop a step-by-step plan to get the family on track again, sometimes by finding better employment or helping a single mother find adequate yet affordable childcare services. From there, the caseworker makes weekly follow-up meetings with the family, which oftentimes sees real change within the first few weeks, Crowe said.

For law enforcement in Montgomery County, the program falls right into Sheriff Rand Henderson's ongoing effort to implement community policing, he said. "As a patrolman, you routinely come across criminal parents or parents that are on drugs or parents that have their issues," Henderson said. "We may have a successful prosecution and send dad off to prison for a whole litany of crimes. But the forgotten-about element is the 4-year-old child he left behind who's now without a mentor, without a father and without someone to look up to and teach him how to grow up and be a man."

A report released in April shows home visits reduce the risk of the family's children falling into a life of crime, meaning fewer and fewer juveniles are being put into the criminal justice system and are instead leading more productive lives, Henderson said.

"If we can keep kids on the right track, that's our next generation of successful additions to our community," Henderson said. "It spoke perfectly to what we wanted to do with our community policing policy. We're looking for partners in the community that have that trusted relationship with others. This is the perfect example right here."

Not only is the program beneficial in reducing crimes, but business leaders also claim it can help them in their ventures down the road. With more and more kids being mentored and taking education more seriously, they become more prepared for the workforce, which excites

Toto Energy COO Todd Blackford. "When you look at a program like this, I don't think you're asking for anything that most families in my neighborhood get as a matter of course," Blackford said. "People do preschool. People do education. Even the dads are coaches. There are a lot of areas where that just doesn't naturally happen. We're not asking for anything we haven't benefited from ourselves. It's just natural, obvious stuff."

More than 3,800 families in Texas were enrolled in MIECHV in 2016. While funding for the upcoming years has been approved by the Texas Legislature, council officials are hopeful about securing federal funding in the future.