

Social workers become attendance counselors

Parents To Be Focus Of Truancy Effort

As long as there have been public schools, there has been the problem of keeping students in them. Warm Springs is spearheading a new attack on absenteeism which, according to officials, has increased dramatically among Warm Springs students in the last two years.

"We're going to get serious about getting our kids into school," said Tribal Education Director Charles Calica, "and once they're there, look into making the curriculum more relevant and meaningful to the Indian student."

Discussion in recent months among school and tribal officials has focused on the first step — improving the head count at Warm Springs Elementary and the junior and senior high schools in Madras. One significant result of this frequent and often heated dialogue has been the approval of a referral system for dealing with attendance problems before they become truancy charges.

The deceptively simple plan, utilizes personnel already involved but clarifies a chain of events once a student has been identified as having a problem. The social worker program which is a joint tribal-school district effort will be the pivotal point in the referral flow.

In addition to improved social services there will be an increased emphasis on legal responsibility. "We'll be holding parents and guardians responsible for getting their kids to school," said Calica.

"We're not going to be hauling kids to school," said Municipal Branch Manager Rudy Clements. "That's the parents' responsibility. We're going to begin immediately to enforce the law and order code, specifically the failure to send children to school and child neglect sections."

Clements said in a recent general education meeting that all his police officers would be on the alert for truant children and prepared to quiz them and their parents about their not being in school.

The curfew ordinance will also be more intensely enforced, said Clements. This ordinance specifies that young people under 18 must be off the streets after 10 p.m. on weekdays and midnight on weekends.

Particular use will be made of that part of the law and order code that makes a parent's failure to send his-her child to school a criminal offense.

In the past, Ordinance No. 40 has been the primary tool for handling truancy. That ordinance provides for a fine or imprisonment of "any child who wilfully and intentionally absents himself from school without his parents' consent."

While all three laws will be used to deal with a problem that is often the result of both student and parental factors, the courts are being considered as only one avenue of action.

"We need to begin knocking on doors...and use our social services to attack family problems," said Clements. "Sometimes the families are as frustrated as the schools."

A Growing School Problem

What the schools have been frustrated with has been a soaring rate of unexcused absences and drop-outs among Warm Springs students. The first quarter of this school year shows 7.7 per cent absenteeism in the grade school, 11 per cent among Indians in the junior high and 15 per cent in the high school. This compares with a nationwide average of 6 per cent. Two Indian seniors have already dropped out this year.

These figures usually tend to increase near the end of the school year, according to school officials.

Although exact truancy figures are lacking because of the difficulty in keeping abreast of the problem, it is recognized that many absentee problems grow into truancy, a snowballing situation that can eventually lead to dropping out.

Calica reports that in the grade school the worst attendance problems are at the Kindergarten level. Attendance improves through the third grade and then declines again.

Community Liaison Delson Suppah said that in most cases "it's not on the parents' priority list to get their kids to school." He did point out, though, that the grade school had the best attendance record of the three schools.

At the junior high, attendance officer and vice principal John Sebastian is faced with two kinds of truancy: when the student truants himself and when the family is not obligating the student to attend school. There are additional social pressures on the junior high student that make skipping look even more attractive.

High school attendance officer John Trujillo sees the Warm Springs students "dropping out mentally in junior high and physically in senior high."

The consensus is that there are too many Warm Springs youngsters whose careers as students follow this pattern. And as Trujillo remarked, the at-

tendance problem has become "bad, worse and astronomical" in the last few years.

Truancy as defined by the state is eight or more unexcused absences in a 20-day period. Ordinance No. 40 indicates that the first unexcused absence is a truancy but it is the state guideline that has been the standard.

Unexcused absences are those for which no reason or an insufficient reason has been supplied by the parent or guardian. Sebastian indicated that some cultural excuses such as ceremonial hunting or fishing are acceptable for Indian students, as long as homework is made up. Being late or absent from school on the Monday after a powwow due to fatigue is not acceptable.

All absences are routinely recorded in the schools and as many as possible are investigated, but a consistent district-wide policy for the time and manner of intervention does not exist.

Door-knocking, telephoning and "cruising" are done in Madras by a truant officer who is paid by the county and the Intermediate Education District.

Truant Officer functions have not been available to Warm Springs since the community had its own officer who was deputized in Warm Springs and Madras and had arresting authority in both places. Reorganization of the Tribal Police Department eliminated the truant officer position, leaving the one officer for the entire district.

In the absence of a particular person with attendance responsibility in Warm Springs, the functions have been scattered among various individuals and agencies, with the resultant problems of inconsistent treatment, overworked personnel and poor communication.

In a recent education report to the Tribal Council Rudy Clements said, "The area we need to discuss is what resources are available to families to prevent truancy and whether

these resources are operating from a similar philosophical base."

The Referral System

Officials are hoping that confusion among the agencies and community members caused by overlapping or delayed services will come to an end with the introduction of the proposed referral system. They also hope that students and families will receive earlier and continued help.

The hue and cry through the recent history of the truancy problem has been for the hiring of another truancy officer, but Calica said that the new social worker program will assume the added responsibility of being attendance counselors.

Their primary function is to serve as extensions of existing school services, by working closely with the Counselors and Community Liaisons in investigating the causes that result in poor school attendance and performance.

The school Social Workers have the advantage of being more mobile and more easily accessible to the community. It is also intended that these persons will serve as more of a link between the schools and community Social Service agencies.

According to the plan the attendance officers in the schools will compile a list of absentee and tardy offenders for the community liaisons and/or Social Workers to investigate. They will assess the reasons causing poor attendance or performance and inform the parents that the problem exists and offer their assistance.

If during the investigation they find that the reason is pure negligence the matter will be referred to the Juvenile Department to initiate a petition.

If the investigation reveals that Social Services may be used to correct the situation the Social Workers may provide the counseling. In a more complex situation a referral will be made to the appropriate social service agencies: Group Home, Drug &

Alcohol, Probation, Welfare, etc.

The Social Worker will maintain a minimum five-day observation to monitor the case for progress. If after that period of time no progress is being made between the school and community service agencies, the case will be referred to the Juvenile Department.

The Tribal Court has given assurances that they will make every effort to bring the case to court within five days of the petition.

This process resembles the efforts of other school districts that are using a strong family counseling and court approach to combat truancy, the main intent being to catch and correct problem situations before they become truancy cases.

The plan is characterized by a helping rather than punishing approach. Several opportunities might be offered before judicial action is recommended.

Enforcing the law and order code in the courts is a "last resort" in Clements' eyes. But placing responsibility on parents for school attendance as specified in the code he feels is a must.

As a juvenile officer said, "Until we get the parents involved, our job is one big circle."

In addition to case by case parental involvement, Clements hopes that public meetings will be scheduled to inform parents of school and tribal policy, their responsibilities and the many programs and services offered in the schools to Indian students.

"Attendance has been a problem for years," said junior high attendance officer Sebastian, "and will continue to be until children feel an obligation from parental figures to go to school. We're beating our heads against the wall when that obligation is not there."

Some Helpful Numbers For Parents

Social Workers
(Bob Parker and Deborah Allen) — 553-1161, ext. 284.
Tribal Education Dept.
(Jody Calica) — 553-1161, ext. 262.
Warm Springs Grade School
— 553-1142
Junior High Liaison
(Marie Calica) — 475-3405.
High School Liaison
(Anna Hurtado) — 475-3888.

Debora Allen - Social Worker

by Roger Stwyer

Funded by the Johnson O'Malley Act but hired through the tribes, Deborah Allen is the new social worker in Warm Springs.

Deborah started her new job Nov. 1, and it's her job to work with the community liaisons in each of the three schools that the tribe has a liaison. Working alongside Bob Parker, Deborah's main function is to follow up where the liaison left off.

Prior to becoming a social worker, Allen worked at the Day Care Center where she was the Parent Health Coordinator for four years.

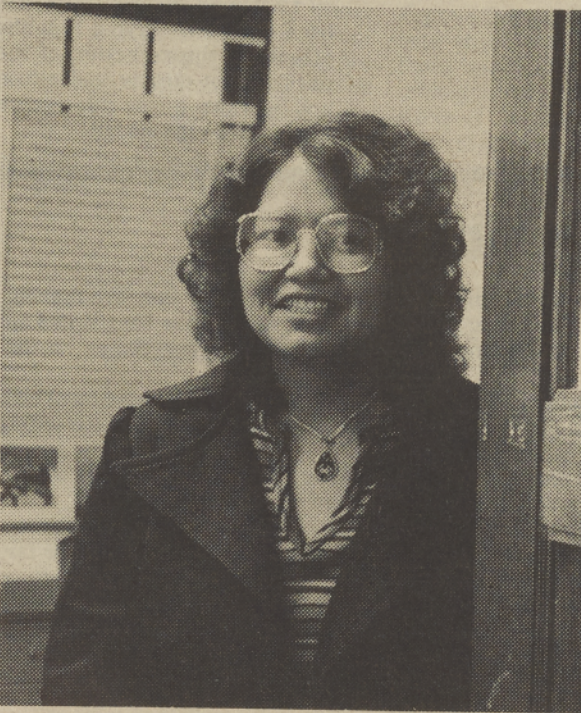
Deborah admits not having a degree, but she does have the experience from working at the Day Care and that's what really counts to many. She is planning on enrolling in an external degree program though, but she isn't certain when she exactly will.

Ms. Allen said that she's glad she took on the job because it's challenging and that she's more aware of the activities in the youth of the community that

she wasn't aware of before.

"I really enjoy going out to the homes and see the kids. A lot

of the parents come to me now that they know I'm a social worker," state Deborah Allen.



New Social Worker Deborah Allen works with community liaisons and counselors at the schools to help students and their families right in the community.

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