

Community Foundations & the Juvenile Court – A New Relationship

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Judge Leonard Edwards
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An interesting relationship has developed in the San Francisco Bay Area between the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation (a public charity) and juvenile court judges. The foundation is able to set aside funds which can be called upon by the judges.

This is a unique approach to grantmaking by a foundation. It is not making a grant directly to a judge but it is making private money available for the welfare of wards of the court.

A case in point is when the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation allocated \$10,000 each for Judge Leonard Edwards and Commissioner Patricia Bresee, in the Juvenile Courts of Santa Clara County and San Mateo County, respectively.

Edwards and Bresee were approached by the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation and asked if they ever had children appear before them who needed dental work, psychotherapy, or who had other critical needs. PVF set aside \$10,000 for each court, from which the Judge and Commissioner could authorize the dental work or therapy, and have the bills sent to the foundation. The foundation in turn would pay the bills and notify the courts of such payments thereby allowing for oversight of the expenditure of the funds.

Judge Edwards, on occasion, would come across an outstanding program deserving of financial support and recommend giving funds from the set aside allotment. These programs in turn, were able to serve the needs of children.

Many variations on this theme have evolved over the years in which the juvenile courts and the foundation have been working together. Judge Edwards wanted to help teen mothers start savings accounts for their children and arranged for the mothers to open such accounts for which the foundation made the first deposit of \$100 into each account.

In San Mateo County, the Juvenile Drug Court has proved to be a highly successful program in treating boys and girls abusing alcohol and other drugs. Close supervision, and participation by the boy or girl and family members in treatment programs are the

most important components of the drug court format. Frequent court appearances are required, and Commissioner Bresee identified a need to reward those participants who were achieving their goals, with something more than congratulatory words and later curfews. She contacted the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation and requested help in obtaining gift certificates to be awarded to youth for progress and special accomplishments, at the time of graduation from drug court. The request was answered immediately. The Foundation purchased and delivered to the court \$600 worth of \$10 gift certificates from Target Stores, Warehouse and Tower Records (\$200 from each store.)

Although \$10 may not seem significant to an adult, for the boys and girls in drug court the certificates not only provide a chance to purchase a much coveted item, they are also symbolic of achievement and progress in a difficult process of sobriety and maturing. The court sessions are conducted with as many as 10 other youth and their family members present. The award of the certificate is accompanied by praise from Commissioner Bresee and the probation officer, and often a parent will add words of acknowledgment of what the child has accomplished. For many of these children, such praise is rare, and to receive it in a public forum, by these adults, makes the moment extremely significant. The recipient comes forward, receives the certificate and a handshake from the Commissioner, accompanied by applause from all those present. When the need arises for more certificates, a phone call to the foundation produces immediate restocking of “the goody bag,” as the envelope has been dubbed.

The gift certificate program has proven so popular that it is used in Santa Clara, San Mateo, and San Francisco Counties by six judicial officers.

There is wide discretion as to the types of things that can be funded in this unique relationship between the Foundation and judicial officers: posters on domestic violence, a luncheon for youth to “meet the chief” (of police), fees for a name change for a juvenile, psychotherapy costs, summer camp, travel costs to bring siblings together for holidays, etc.

According to Judge Edwards, “Juvenile Court judges are in an ideal position to identify children with special needs. The community’s most vulnerable children come before the juvenile dependency and delinquency courts on a daily basis. Judges learn what these children are doing in their lives and what actions can assist them to achieve personal goals. When a child needs a uniform, funds for a summer project, a musical instrument, or just a reward to acknowledge an accomplishment, the judge is able to identify that need. If resources are available, for example from a community foundation, the judge is able to ask the foundations to meet the need. In each situation

the child realizes that someone has responded to a special request and that the system can work. From my experience, modest resources strategically utilized can have an enormous impact on children who appear in juvenile court. The partnership between community foundations and the juvenile court can truly benefit children.”

Public charities, which encompass all community foundations and entities such as the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation, have latitude in their grantmaking. They can give to anything that is charitable such as youth programs, education, health, etc.

There are over 500 such foundations in the United States with assets of \$22 billion and annual distributions of over \$2.5 billion. Bill Somerville, the President of Philanthropic Ventures Foundation, has made on-site consulting visits to over 190 of these foundations in an effort to help them improve their grantmaking. He has found that most of these foundations are eager to try new approaches to grantmaking.

Somerville, Judge Edwards and Commissioner Bresee believe that relationships between community foundations and the juvenile courts can be productive and that the model developed in the San Francisco Bay Area should be replicated in other communities. They believe it is time for representatives from community foundations to reach out to juvenile court judicial officers and for judges to contact community foundations.

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