

Bester Community of Hope



Better Together offers monthly community events to make environmental improvements. Photo courtesy of Life House Church

written by **LAURA EMMONS**

There, but for the Grace of God, go I. Many people have had that thought. One crisis or one unexpected catastrophe could mean the difference between security and homelessness. A loss of a home could lead to family separation.

For example, a boy with asthma required breathing treatments at least once a week. The school nurse was not able to provide the treatment, so each time he had a breathing issue, he was transported to an emergency room. The excessive school absences affected his education, and the time his mother missed from work because of his medical needs might have created a hardship for the family.

The consequences could have been dire, but they weren't because the Bester Community of Hope (BCOH) was there to help.

BCOH leverages relationships with community partners to maximize opportunities for families in the south end of Hagerstown by eliminating barriers to re-

sources, such as medical care. Among the many services is a health center at Bester Elementary School. BCOH partners with the Community Free Clinic in Hagerstown and Washington County Public Schools to provide that service. The boy didn't have to leave school for care, his mother didn't miss time from work and their family was able to overcome the difficulties associated with his asthma.

"We fill gaps," explains Jen Younker, director of Bester Community of Hope. She describes BCOH as a catch-all support organization. It is a small, community-based nonprofit, so it does not have to deal with the bureaucracy of state-run agencies. Family support specialists at BCOH meet with people in crisis, determine which needs aren't being met by another agency, and use whatever means are necessary to complement and develop a family's support system.

PREVENTION INSTEAD OF RESPONSE

BCOH is one of three initiatives of the San Mar Family and Community Services organization. The San Mar Treatment

Foster Care initiative serves children and youth who have experienced trauma by connecting them with safe and caring families. The Jack E. Barr Center for Well-Being is an outpatient mental-health clinic. BCOH works within the region served by Bester Elementary to prevent family crisis situations, like homelessness, child abuse and family separation.

San Mar traces its roots to 1883, when the Washington County Orphan's Home was founded to house and care for children orphaned by the Civil War and ensuing events. San Mar has continued to provide foster care, adoption services and mental-health care for 132 years.

Traditionally, San Mar became involved with families after a crisis occurred, but there was a desire to develop programs that could prevent the types of situations that resulted in family separation. A strategic initiative was started in 2013 to find actions San Mar could take to prevent things like child abuse and neglect. The following year, San Mar partnered with Casey Family Programs, a Seattle initiative with the same

FAMILY



Hagerstown nonprofit encourages partnerships

goals. They realized they needed to transition their focus from a campus-based environment to a model of neighborhood involvement.

The area served by Bester Elementary School in South Hagerstown was chosen as the initial neighborhood because of the amount of need, combined with the availability of local assets and committed members of the community. BCOH was formally opened in 2015, after it received a substantial donation from the Alice Virginia and David W. Fletcher Foundation.

Yunker notes that BCOH used to serve 30 kids at a time in group homes, but can now serve three times that many children with after-school care programs.

BCOH family support workers follow evidence-based practices based on the Strengthening Families approach developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Their efforts are incorporated

into three areas of family life: school, neighborhood and home.

SCHOOL INITIATIVES

BCOH runs a 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school program, South End 21, at Bester Elementary and E. Russell Hicks Middle School. An in-school health center is offered in partnership with the Community Free Clinic. Through a partnership with the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, BCOH prepares lesson plans for teachers to help develop social and emotional skills.

Diana Butler, a third-grade teacher at Bester Elementary, has taught for 20 years. Most of her career has been spent teaching students from low-income and in-crisis families. For the last four to five years, she has incorporated lessons that teach social and emotional skills. She says it helps the children feel better

about themselves and treat each other better in the classroom.

The lesson plans, or toolkits, focus on helping children understand their feelings and express themselves. They help build trust and teach conflict resolution. The toolkit incorporates trauma-responsive programming as part of its approach.

Butler starts the school day working on such skills with her students. After breakfast, she calls a class meeting. Her third-graders sit in a circle on a rug and follow an agenda. They start by greeting each other. Butler encourages them to make eye contact with others in the room and learn the names of every student in her class. Then each student must do one of three things:

- Give another student a compliment
- Offer words of encouragement to another student
- Ask a question of another student

Left: Building parental resilience is one of the goals of Parent Cafés, monthly gatherings at which parents can fortify themselves to meet the stresses associated with daily life.

Middle: Because bus transportation is not offered in the area near Bester Elementary School, Bester Community of Hope organizes the Walking School Bus. It consists of community ambassadors who make the trip between home and school safe and fun.

Right: Bester Community of Hope parents and community partners from Washington County Department of Social Services attended the Together With Families Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.

Photos courtesy of Life House Church

The process teaches the children how to appropriately interact with others, which helps them to develop empathy. They feel a sense of trust in the classroom and they know it is a safe place for them. If a child doesn't share during the meeting, she speaks with him or her one-on-one later in the day.

After the greeting, Butler leads a lesson. Sometimes, she holds up a picture of a child looking sad, frustrated or happy, and the students discuss what they think is going on in the picture. She shows them flashcards with facial expressions so the children can identify different emotions.

In one of her favorite lessons, she shows students how to squeeze toothpaste out of a tube. Then, she asks them, "If you say something that hurts someone's feelings, what can you do? The hurtful words can't be taken back, just like the toothpaste can't be put back in the tube, so what do you do?" They dis-

cuss the value of apologizing and committing to not saying hurtful things in the future.

She extends the lesson to a practical situation: "Tomorrow, we will have a substitute teacher. How will you treat that teacher? Will you use hurtful words?"

Butler knows that some students have bad situations at home, so she makes sure they all know their full name, address and phone number. She talks with them about anxiety over things like standardized tests or holidays, when they spend several days out of school.

The process works. Butler recounts a story about a boy who was angry all of the time. He lashed out, flipping desks and chairs. The police had to be called. The boy crawled under a desk and barricaded himself. He had been in six schools in the past couple of years. His father left the family, and his mother was in and out of his life. He told Butler that he didn't feel like he belonged anywhere.

She sent him to another class temporarily and then held a class meeting with the other kids about what they could do to make him feel welcome and included. The other students brainstormed ideas. When the boy returned to the classroom, they all helped him feel better. Now, he works with other kids to make them feel welcome.

BCOH serves as a liaison with community resource officers assigned to Bester Elementary and E. Russell Hicks Middle. The officers participate in after-school programming, and offer health and wellness lessons. Yonker says the interactions reduce fear between police and the community, and help them develop a rapport at an early age.

Because bus transportation is not offered in the area near Bester Elementary, BCOH organizes the Walking School Bus. It consists of community ambassadors who make the trip between home and school safe and fun. They teach children how to safely walk to and from school. Past ambassadors have included Army recruiters who taught kids to march in cadence. The helpers also held "Dance to School Days," when they danced during the entire trip.

Those participating in the Walking School Bus work with Sarah Mason, the crossing guard at the corner of Frederick Street and Memorial Avenue. Mason has worked on that corner for 47 years and has been a crossing guard with Washington County Public Schools for 52 years. Mason won second place in the 2018 "America's Favorite Crossing Guard" contest.



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NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAMS

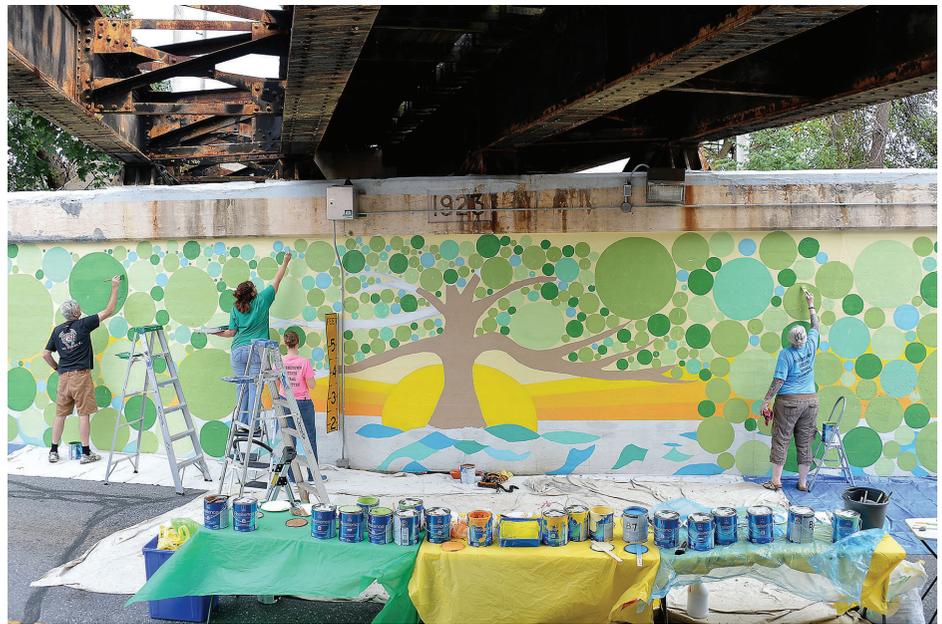
When neighbors help neighbors, the whole community can be a safer and more comfortable place to live. BCOH supports several programs to encourage community involvement.

The Community Advisory Board is usually comprised of 50% residents, 25% local business leaders and 25% local organizations. Members meet quarterly to discuss problems facing the community, like the need to repair the sidewalk under the overpass on Memorial Avenue.

BCOH spearheads beautification efforts like the mural on Memorial Avenue. An underpass was rundown, and kids were walking in the street instead of on the sidewalk. BCOH raised funds and coordinated volunteers to paint the mural. The advisory board communicated to city officials the need to make the repairs to the sidewalk. Now, the kids enjoy walking past the mural, on the sidewalk and not in the street.

BCOH cultivates a number of strategic community partnerships, including one with the Hagerstown Area Religious Council (HARC). There are 17 churches and synagogues in the area served by Bester Area, and BCOH works with most of them to provide opportunities for family support.

BCOH periodically brings experts to South Hagerstown to lead community training sessions on subjects like building resilience. Interfacing with the Hagerstown Police Department on a regular basis help citizens feel more comfortable with the local community resource officers. BCOH also works with It's a Blessing to be a Blessing Inc. to help feed neighbors in need.



Volunteers paint a mural along a West Memorial Boulevard railroad underpass in Hagerstown's South End.

Photo by Julie E. Greene

While most of the programs only support families living in the catchment area for Bester Elementary in South Hagerstown, the organization's community events are open to the general public. Parent Cafés, Babypalooza, Family Day and the annual Southside Block Party provide opportunities to meet neighbors. The block party features musical performances, rides, activities, games offered by local businesses and representatives from local resource organizations.

FAMILY SUPPORT

BCOH also fills gaps in family support. For example, a man and woman wanted to be wed while the terminally ill father of one of them was still alive. A family support worker at BCOH is also an ordained minister, so a wedding was organized in short order so the father could be part of it.

According to the Strengthening Families approach, there are five factors that lead to family success: parental re-

silience, child development, concrete needs, social connections, and the social and emotional development of children. Child development and the social/emotional development of children are addressed by the partnership between BCOH and Washington County Public Schools. Concrete needs include food, shelter, clothing and medical care. BCOH works with the Department of Social Services and several nonprofit agencies in an effort to provide families near Bester Elementary with necessities. Social connections are addressed by the neighborhood initiatives.

Building parental resilience is one of the goals of Parent Cafés, monthly gatherings at which parents can fortify themselves to meet the stresses associated with daily life. The goal is to prevent the mistreatment of children by helping parents cope with their specific issues.

Joan Balbuena, a family support worker at BCOH, says the meetings are run



Bester Community of Hope Family Day includes family portraits as part of helping parents celebrate the things that make their families strong.
Photo courtesy of Life House Church

by parents, for parents. Groups of four people engage in conversations. Once parents are experienced with the cafés, they can undergo training to become facilitators who lead the roundtable discussions. They welcome new members, explain the terms – like parent resilience – and teach the processes that have worked for other families. Facilitators also can lead one-on-one discussions.

The training process is not easy or cheap. BCOH obtains funds from the Maryland Family Network for training, child care, and transportation to and from Baltimore and other locations where training is held. A stipend is provided to those attending a facilitator institute to offset lost wages. At the training, participants learn how to teach the five protective factors that help strengthen the family framework.

In addition to Parent Cafés, Balbuena spearheads a Hispanic parenting support group for Spanish-speaking members of the community.

The home-visiting program and substance-exposed newborns care team are the most intensive initiatives run by BCOH. To participate in the former, referrals must be made by Bester Elementary School, the Jack E. Barr Center for Well-Being, the Department of Social Services or area clergy. A family-assessment support team meets with members

"I would not be where I am today if it weren't for Bester Community of Hope."



Jasmine Saum

of a family in crisis and determines what community resources are available to help. Then, the Community Triage Services (CTS) team provides support.

BCOH coordinates services with the Department of Social Services, Meritus Health, the school system and the Maryland Department of Health to keep families with substance-exposed newborns together as they face the difficulties associated with caring for such infants.

Jasmine Saum, a single mother of five children, one of whom is now an adult living on her own, recounts how BCOH changed her life and that of her family.

"I would not be where I am today if it weren't for Bester Community of Hope," she says.

One of her children is a low-functioning autistic boy. He struggled at Bester Elementary because of sensory overload. After he lashed out at school staff members, the Department of Social Services was called in to check on the child's welfare. The social worker saw Saum's son in the school and referred her family to BCOH.

Teri Conrad, a lead family-support worker at BCOH, was assigned to help. Conrad helped Saum set goals for all of her children. One needed advanced placement. Conrad taught her how to advocate for her kids in special education. Then, Conrad helped connect Saum with community resources.

She even attended an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting with Saum to determine the appropriate placement for her autistic son. The boy was transferred to an autism class at Marshall Street School. He stopped exhibiting negative behaviors and is now thriving.

Saum says she didn't have any family members she could turn to for help. Conrad and the others at BCOH became her support system. Even now, although her case is closed and she has moved to Franklin County, Pa., she knows that if she needs advice or someone to talk to, she can reach out to BCOH.

Saum was honored when she was asked to join the Parent Advisory Council (PAC). Through the PAC, she can give back, offering perspective to other parents in need. Recently, the group conducted a laundry pod awareness campaign. Members visited local laundromats, spoke with people and handed out literature about the dangers of leaving laundry pods with unattended children.

They also help build morale among the teachers at Bester Elementary, who Saum says are dedicated, hardworking and underpaid. The PAC brought a caramel-apple bar in for the teachers. Sliced

apples and a variety of toppings, including caramel and other candies, like M&Ms, were served buffet-style.

The PAC holds a monthly evening meeting and weekly morning meetings, at which attendees brainstorm ideas about how they can help the community. Right now, assisting those affected by the opioid crisis in South Hagerstown is a topic of discussion.

Even though she no longer lives in Hagerstown, Saum is active in the PAC. She values the lifelong connections she made through BCOH.

"Everything has changed for the better because of the Bester Community of Hope, and I am so thankful," she says.

By focusing on the pillars of support, school, neighborhood and home, Bester Community of Hope aims to help families in South Hagerstown avoid crises and improve their lives.

To learn more about the Bester Community of Hope, make a donation or get involved, go to besterhope.org.

Contact information:
 Bester Community of Hope
 370 Mill St., Hagerstown, MD 21740
 240-513-6370 | Fax: 240-513-6372
connect@besterhope.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

Babypalooza

Nov. 2 at Bester Elementary School

Families expecting a baby or those with an infant are welcome to attend.

There will be 35 vendors on hand with free items. Several pediatricians will offer advice. The Early Childhood Action Council will present a carnival-themed station; Meritus Medical Center will have a safe-sleeping station; and BCOH will hold a home-safety program. There will be a belly-painting station for expectant moms. Pack-and-play gift bags, including diapers and formula, will be distributed.



Submitted photo.

Home visiting program, Christmas elves

In December, families enrolled in the home-visiting family support program give their Community Triage Services team members Christmas wish lists. The team will put together gifts for the kids, as well as gift packages tailored to a family's holiday needs, including family fun baskets containing items to keep them entertained during the winter break. In past years, they have served more than 100 kids in one holiday season.



Bester Community of Hope hosted the Recovery Coach Academy training for staff, residents and community partners to build recovery capital and support families affected by substance abuse.

Submitted photo.