

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly

## Reflections on the Season

By Kim Wilson

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November begins the holiday season, a time for reflection and thanksgiving followed by resolutions to “do better”, whatever that may mean for each of us. So as the season begins, here are a few thoughts for consideration.

So far this fiscal year the Polk County Department of Social Services (DSS) has averaged over 39 children in foster care and approximately 21 reports of child abuse and neglect each month. The majority of the child welfare services Polk County DSS provides to children and families involve issues of substance abuse, domestic violence, unmet mental health needs and poverty.

Of the children Polk DSS has served in foster care, the majority of those children’s families have experienced some type of substance abuse issue impacting the child’s safety, and precipitating their entry into foster care. That majority does not include families where substance abuse has not resulted in the child’s entry into foster care, but remains a risk issue. The negative impact of substance use on families is nothing new, and hardly shocking. The news is filled with stories highlighting this fact, but many times it feels like it’s happening somewhere else, some place bigger or farther away, despite the reality. We know prescription drug use is up in North Carolina and we’ve heard of the heroin epidemic in the northeast, and think it’s not here. The NC Western Crime Lab has seen a significant increase in submissions of heroin and fentanyl over the past few years, following the national trend of a resurgence of this drug. It would be a mistake to underestimate the spread of this epidemic.

Many people suffer mental illness in silence, afraid of the stigma that accompanies it and believe that they are alone. According to Mental Health Facts published by NAMI (National Alliance of Mental Illness), nationwide “nearly 1 in 5 adults and children ages 13-18 have or will experience a mental health illness”, and “the average delay between the onset of symptoms and intervention is 8 – 10 years.” According to Becky Brodar, RN Community Outreach Coordinator Geriatric Psychiatry at St. Luke’s Hospital, data published by the CDC (Center for Disease Control) ranks Polk County’s suicide rate 2nd in NC. Two of the risk factors for suicide are mental illness and substance abuse.

Incidents of domestic violence often go unreported, and escaping the violence is more challenging than most of us would like to acknowledge. The NC Council for Women reports from July 2015 through June 2016 there were 101,940 telephone calls to domestic violence shelters in North Carolina, and a total of 48,601 clients. In Polk County during this same period of time our local domestic violence shelter, Steps to Hope, received 892 phone calls for information concerning services, assisted 186 unduplicated victims of domestic violence, and provided shelter services for 39 of these individuals, 29 of whom were children.

Last November in North Carolina the Department of Social Services provided Food and Nutrition benefits to 1,643,503 individuals which represented 800,190 cases. According to the USDA, in 2014 there were

approximately 1.6 million North Carolinians living in poverty, and the poverty rate for children was 24.1%. It seems unimaginable that nearly a quarter of children in NC live in poverty. So, could that possibly be true in Polk County? The overall poverty rate in Polk County is less than the poverty rate for the State of NC but the poverty rate for children in Polk County is slightly higher at 25.2%. That's 1 in 4 children in Polk County living in poverty.

The trauma associated with substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence and poverty has far reaching effects for the child, the family and our community. This holiday season I encourage/challenge each of us to consider the needs of our community, even needs beyond those mentioned here, and the power we possess to meet them. How can I "do better"? How can I help? How can I give back? Where can I donate my time, knowledge or money? Polk County has a wide variety of opportunities to be a part of meeting the needs of our community through numerous organizations or agencies. Find one this season and join them in their mission. *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* Margaret Mead

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) is a group of 80+ community members, leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. Our last meeting of 2016 is Thursday, November 17 noon at the Polk County Library. For more information please visit our website at [www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org](http://www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org).