



# CSSD Chronicle



A bi-weekly publication of information and news about Court Support Services Division

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## KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: MODEL COMMUNITY COUNSELING PROGRAM USES LITERATURE TO HELP CHANGE LIVES

In our continuing series highlighting innovative practices, this issue of the *Chronicle* will feature a program called Project ECHO (Education Can Help Outcomes) and a component of that program, *Changing Lives through Literature (CLTL)*. Operated by Community Partners in Action (CPA) ECHO is at CPA's New Britain AIC and Project MORE's New Haven AIC. Several community-based foundations fund the program. Plans are currently underway to expand to Bridgeport starting July 1<sup>st</sup>. The *Changing Lives* component uses literature and group discussion in a college setting to help group participants discover self-awareness and insight into their behavior through reading and discussion.

**BACKGROUND:** The *CLTL* component was developed in 1991 by two friends, a Massachusetts District Court Judge and a college professor of literature from the University of Massachusetts. Their idea was to conduct reading groups with offenders in a university classroom setting and build a school/criminal justice partnership. That first group of offenders was sentenced to the series of reading group discussions instead of jail. They were greatly influenced by the literature and discussions and a lot of behavior changes were generated. Group participants began reading to their children and talking about the stories with their significant others, thinking about continuing their education and reconnecting with their families. There are now *CLTL* groups throughout the United States and Great Britain.

**FIRST CT PROGRAM AT NEW BRITAIN:** In the fall of 2002 the New Britain AIC started the first CT *CLTL* program as part of Project ECHO. Brian Sullivan, a retired Probation Officer, who is the School Liaison at ECHO New Britain, started *CLTL*. Filomena Aresco, a college student intern at CPA at the time, was also instrumental in getting the first class started. Sullivan recruited a Tunxis Community College Professor, Francena Dwyer, to conduct the first class at the college with five students who were referred to the AIC by the court. Clients are tested on their ability to read at a minimum of an eighth-grade level as part of the selection process by the AIC. They then make a commitment to participate in the classes and the group discussions. *CLTL*

groups last for eight weeks at a cost of about \$1500 to \$2000 for the facilitator. The professor moderates the discussion and participates as an equal member. According to Sullivan, "Something extraordinary happened in our first group. Clients were not required to complete the class once their court order ended. But four students to whom this happened stayed on to complete the session. This tells me there's really something going on here." By the last class of that first session, clients were talking about finishing high school and going to college. Since then, New Britain has coordinated another successful eight-week series at Tunxis and according to Beth Hines, New Britain AIC Program Manager, "Yale University recently confirmed that they will host a *CLTL* for ECHO New Haven in September. Needless to say we are quite psyched about this opportunity!" Joseph Wickliffe is the ECHO School Liaison in New Haven who will be working on this project.

**A COMMUNITY COUNSELING MODEL PROGRAM:** According to Sullivan, the *CLTL* program seems to work on many levels helping at risk clients to transform their lives and experience growth through the study of literature. A key component is the location. Just being on a campus has been positive for clients, many of who never even considered the possibility of attending classes at a university with a college professor. At first, some clients "stand out" from the rest of the students but in a short time they are dressing and walking like college students. The group discussion format encourages all members to share their ideas and treat each other with respect and dignity. The program fosters personal growth by giving clients the skills to self reflect through the literature and discussion. It also strengthens linkages between the college and the community, enhancing access to resources for all citizens. Preliminary research about the program has found that participants have a reduced recidivism rate based upon new convictions. A study of the men who went through the first *CLTL* program in Massachusetts found that only 18% re-offended compared with 43% in a comparable group that did not participate. CSSD Executive Director Bill Carbone is very supportive of the *Changing Lives* initiative. "I think this effort provides an extraordinary opportunity for our clients to transform their lives. It opens the door to learning which has always been the key to a better life." **FOR MORE INFORMATION** contact Beth Hines at [bhines@cpa-ct.org](mailto:bhines@cpa-ct.org) or 860-827-8045.

**SUGGESTIONS? QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? CONCERNS? CONTACT US!**

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