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Onorato Celebrates Success of Family Activity Center at County Jail

Portrait of Gwen Elliott unveiled during anniversary commemoration

PITTSBURGH — Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato today joined Warden Ramon Rustin and officials from the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation (PCGF) and Lydia's Place to celebrate the success of the Gwendolyn June Campbell Elliott Family Activity Center on its first anniversary at the County Jail. It is the first family friendly waiting area of its kind in a major jail in the United States.

“I want to congratulate the center and its volunteers for a successful year of providing education, services and comfort to children who visit family members in our jail,” said Onorato. “More than 40 volunteers have donated in excess of 2,000 hours of service to the center. Thanks to the volunteers’ efforts, children visiting our jail are having more comfortable, positive experiences, and their caregivers have access to helpful information and important resources.”

Since opening in late spring 2007, the center has had more than 3,800 visits from children and 3,200 visits from adults accompanying children as they wait to visit loved ones.

“Creating such a facility was my lifelong dream,” said Rustin. “I can hardly begin to express the sense of pride I feel as I walk through the jail’s lobby each day. I now see children engaged in activities, eating healthy snacks, and enjoying their time in the waiting area. We certainly have reason to celebrate today.”

The County Executive issued a proclamation, brought as a “Speedy Delivery” by Mr. McFeely of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, designating August 15, 2008, as “Gwendolyn June Campbell Elliott Family Activity Center Day” in Allegheny County. Kathi Elliott, daughter of the late Pittsburgh Police Commander, unveiled a portrait of her mother that will hang in the center along with a plaque describing Gwen’s great contributions to creating the family-friendly waiting area.

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“We always considered Gwen Elliott to be our ‘chief volunteer’ since she personally recruited many of the center’s original volunteers,” said Rustin. “Now the center’s goal is to double the number of volunteers by the end of this year, so we’re encouraging people to honor Gwen’s legacy by becoming volunteers.”

Beginning in late 2005, Commander Elliott joined with more than 100 individuals and community organizations to design the center and its programs under the leadership of the PCGF, Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections, and Lydia’s Place Inc., an organization dedicated to helping female offenders and their children rebuild their lives.

“The Board and staff of Lydia’s Place are pleased to have played a key role in the creation and implementation of this center,” said Kip Bryant, board president of Lydia’s Place.

Onorato also announced that after a successful year under the management of Lydia’s Place, the Family Activity Center has been integrated into the jail’s operations and programming under the supervision and management of the Warden. While there will be no visible changes to visitors or volunteers, this is a major step in ensuring the center’s continued operation.

In addition to volunteer services, valued in excess of \$40,000 for the past year, foundations, churches and individuals have donated more than \$400,000 to develop and maintain the center.

The Family Activity Center includes a craft area, video nook and book corner, as well as mock visiting booths to help children prepare for visits. Full-time employees and trained volunteers offer caregivers information on services and resources important to the well-being of children.

To volunteer at the Family Activity Center, contact Shirlene Jones at 412-350-6423.

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The Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation is devoted solely to promoting the mental health and optimal development of children from birth through age 12 who reside in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Established in 1982, the Foundation is the successor to the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Center, which conducted research, training, and direct psychiatric services for children for more than a half century.

PCGF conducted a two-year study, “Children of Incarcerated Parents,” as the initial phase of its current initiative to mobilize community support for children whose parents are incarcerated.

For additional information, visit www.PittsburghChildGuidanceFoundation.org.