

March 26, 2015 - Resource Center Opens In Chiefland

# Center to help people opens in Chiefland on Monday



Seen as part of the ribbon-cutting event (from left) are Florida Department of Children and Families Assistant Secretary for Programs Janice Thomas; Chiefland City Councilman Rollin Hudson, Chiefland City Councilman Chris Jones, Tri-County Community Resources Board Member Diana Child (with scissors); Chiefland City Manager Mary Ellzey (with scissors); Tri-County Community Resources Center Manager Beverly Landingham (with scissors); U.F. Child Protection Team Coordinator Stephanie Cox (with scissors); Partnership for Strong Families Chairman of the Board Dr. Michael V. Bowie; and

**Partnership for Strong Families President and CEO Stephen Pennypacker, Esq. The four women each are holding one part of two sets of scissors. In the bottom photo, the ribbon is cut by an actual pair of scissors used by Child.**



### **Story and Photos**

**By Jeff M. Hardison © March 20, 2015 @ 4:37 p.m.**

**CHIEFLAND** – The Tri-County Community Resource Center (TCCRC) is open for business on Monday morning (March 23) at 15 N. Main St., which is on the east side of U.S. Highway 19 just north of the traffic light at Park Avenue.

A ribbon-cutting and inaugural ceremony on Thursday afternoon provided an opportunity for some of its founding leaders to tell the area what this means for people in Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.



The concept to provide people with one source for assistance with emergency food, clothing and other help started with Diana Child, the administrative assistant at First United Methodist Church of Chiefland.

### **Jenn Petion of the Partnership for Strong Families**

The concept grew from having sheets of paper with names, addresses and telephone organizations to become an actual brick and mortar structure where people will go to gain assistance with improving their station in life.

The Partnership for Strong Families and the Florida Department of Children and Families are a couple of the many organizations that have joined forces to create this new service center. The Chiefland City Commission and City Manager Mary Ellzey are instrumental factors in the former Building Department Building, which was also a former City Hall, becoming the place for activity.



Jenn Petion of the Partnership for Strong Families (PSF) served as emcee for the opening ceremonies. She first introduced Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) Assistant Secretary of Programs Janice Thomas.

### **Florida Department of Children and Families Assistant Secretary of Programs Janice Thomas**

DCF Secretary Mike Carroll reportedly wanted to attend, but was needed at the Florida Senate for a hearing on Thursday.

“We are the child’s last, best hope,” Petion said Carroll has told people about DCF.

“This center is really about strengthening families so that we never have to get to that point (where DCF is at the door),” Petion said. “I think that is the exciting thing about today.”



Thomas said she was happy to see so many people with the same mission in their hearts and minds, which would include putting the DCF out of business, because families would have no need for state intervention. When people pull together and serve children and families, then that is what helps DCF to not have to take enforcement actions.

### **Partnership for Strong Families President and CEO Stephen Pennypacker, Esq.**

PSF President and CEO Stephen Pennypacker, Esq., spoke next.

Pennypacker thanked Gilchrist County Sheriff Robert “Bobby” Schultz III, Levy County Sheriff Robert “Bobby” McCallum Jr. and Eighth Judicial Circuit State Attorney William “Bill” Cervone for attending the opening ceremonies. Among the 80 or so other people who were also present were Levy County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, Chiefland City Commissioner Chris Jones and Chiefland City Commissioner Rollin Hudson.



The community came together united for a common cause to have a synergistic impact together, Pennypacker said. The many resources available in the Tri-County Area are showcased at the TCCRC, he said.

**Chiefland City Manager Mary Ellzey (left) and Tri-County Community Resources Board Member Diana Child listen to Stephen Pennypacker.**

When he became CEO of PSF in April, Pennypacker heard about the agency's work at resource center's in Alachua County. They have become nationally recognized as an innovator in child protection.



one wing of the building. Team Coordinator Stephanie Cox was among the speakers at the opening.

DCF offered computers and First United Methodist Church of Chiefland provided “the sweat equity which got us to the finish line,” Pennypacker said.

“They offered the time and ‘can-do spirit’ of one of their own staff, Diana Child, who has contributed countless hours to making calls and sending letters that brought many of you here today as partners with this center,” Pennypacker said.



**Guests tour the facility scheduled to open on Monday morning.**

Without each and every participant, the center would not be possible, he continued.

“This center belongs to Gilchrist, Levy and Dixie counties,” he said.

He introduced Pebbles Edelman, senior vice president of Clinical and Community Services at Partnership for Strong Families in Gainesville, and Beverly Landingham, who is now the manager of the center.

Landingham has experience with child protection, having worked previously with the Guardian Ad Litem Program in this judicial circuit. She has been a lifelong resident of the Tri-County Area.

Attorney Pennypacker himself has served as a magistrate over child welfare dependency cases in Levy and Gilchrist counties, and he is pleased to be in the group to cut the ribbon to herald its start. The children of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties will benefit from the work that made this dream into a reality, he said.

“Thank you for helping us get her today,” he said, “so that they can have a better tomorrow.”

Child said there was a group of people who help needy people on a regular basis

who got together in April of 2013 as they started talking about sharing resources. There were a few churches, a few non-profit groups and some business interests who were involved at the start.

Tri-County Community Resources was born from those 10 or so people getting together and comparing notes on how to help people in need, she said. The vision of helping people get on their feet is the foundation for the center, she said.

Child thanked First UMC Pastor Terry Wines and the congregation of First United Methodist Church of Chiefland for providing support for the project. She thanked the Chiefland City Commission and City Manager Ellzey.

She thanked A.D. Goodman and the other members of the Tri-County Community Resources Board of Directors, and many others, although she mentioned there was not enough time to even list all of the names of people who deserved thanks for their contributions to the effort.

Child also mentioned her thanks to God for His work all of the way through the process.

City Manager Ellzey said the partnership with the city started 13 months ago, when the City Commission was approached by Child with the idea to use this building.

Child shared her ideas, Ellzey said, as the two of them were in initially cleaning up the inside of the old building. The city manager heard how it would help the city and the Tri-County Area.

It wasn't until Ellzey and other city leaders toured the Partnership for Strong Families SWAG Family Resource Center in Gainesville that Ellzey understood the concept completely, she said.

"What an awesome place that is," Ellzey said. "And what an awesome place this center will be too."

When Ellzey learned about the Child Protection Team having an office at the TCCRC, the city manager said she had mixed emotions.

"I was saddened because there is a need for that (child protection)," Ellzey said. "But also, on the other hand, I am grateful and I think this community is blessed, that they're able to be here for our children and for this community."

The city manager thanked everyone for attending the opening of the Tri-County Community Resource Center in Chiefland.

Cox spoke last.

She thanked the City of Chiefland for allowing the Child Protection Team to be "roommates" with the Partnership for Strong Families at the TCCRC.

There has been a vision to have a child advocacy center in this region for more than two years, Cox said. The core services of the Child Protection Team will supplement the DCF investigations with the various law enforcement agencies and the State Attorneys' Offices.

Dixie County is in the Third Judicial Circuit, where State Attorney Jeff Siegmeister is the top prosecutor.

Preventing abuse is the best option, but when that happens the Child Protection Team can work with officers and the courts to resolve civil and criminal issues.

During the tour, Cox and Petion showed visitors many areas where children can play, use tutors after school, and use computers for schoolwork. There are individual conference areas, as well as places for confidential consultations and interviews.

The former building department, and before that old city hall, has now been transformed into a multi-purpose structure for providing emergency food and clothing to families. It is a resource center to guide people toward methods to improve their employability skills.

It is a single stop for many purposes, and it is a place where people can be helped to improve their lives through counseling, guidance and referral. The Child Protection Team's wing, too, is that "Last Best Hope" for abused children to be saved from an environment that the other staff and volunteers are trying to change or preclude from coming to be.