

OUR VIEW

Council's mission is still vital

OUR POSITION: *The dissolution of Charlotte County's Children's Services Council was an unfortunate necessity, but the pursuit of its goals can continue with the right partnership and determination by those involved.*

When Charlotte County commissioners voted recently to kill off the Children's Services Council, there was really no alternative — despite the need for a champion for the county's young people.

The council, filled with appointed volunteers, was put together about 14 years ago with a charge to report to the County Commission on children's issues in the county. The responsibilities were both broad and slightly obscure, but that was just one problem.

When the Florida Legislature passed the Juvenile Welfare Services Act it gave each county the opportunity to pass a referendum to fund a special board to look after children's welfare through research and contact with young people. Charlotte County's attempt to pass a referendum to fund the council failed in 1992. So, the council was always broke.

"We had no real money to work with," said Rich Simpson, a local attorney who was chairman of the council. "I think we have something like \$375 in our treasury right now."

Children's councils in other counties, like Broward, have had greater success. But Charlotte's 10-member council was never able to accomplish much because of the lack of funds. What began as a group that met once a month, ended up a council that met quarterly. And, according to Simpson, he couldn't remember "the last time" the council's annual report was actually completed.

Charlotte County, realizing the referendum did not pass, argued that the council was not properly formed. A resolution to dissolve it was the logical, albeit sad, step to take.

So that essentially leaves the youth in Charlotte County without an advocate.

That void may soon be filled.

Diane Ramseyer, executive director of Drug Free Charlotte County, and members of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation have been in talks with the FutureMakers Coalition to step in and take on some responsibility for addressing children's issues here — most notably in education.

FutureMakers' main goal is to increase adults' post-secondary degrees in Southwest Florida.

The stated goal is to hike the level of adults with a post-secondary degree from its current 27 percent to 40 percent by 2025.

The foundation, through its work to streamline the process for students, was attracted to FutureMakers.

The two groups sponsored a meeting recently to explore ways to work together and have scheduled a second get-together for noon, Nov. 9 at the Charlotte County Justice Center — a meeting open to anyone who has an interest in children's issues.

Ramseyer said that meeting will be followed by a forum where all the players will talk about the next step, what the goals for Charlotte County should be and how to work on a birth-to-adulthood approach to improving the overall plight of young people here.

"We want to look at what assets we need," Ramseyer said. "We may focus on educational initially, but we want to look at workforce opportunities and anything we need to boost our assets here (for children)."

It sounds like a focused approach to giving our kids some tools for a successful adulthood.