

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE HEALTH, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

April 28, 2005

3:07 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Peggy Wilson, Chair
Representative Vic Kohring
Representative Sharon Cissna
Representative Berta Gardner

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Paul Seaton, Vice Chair
Representative Tom Anderson
Representative Lesil McGuire

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: FAMILY WELLNESS WARRIORS INITIATIVE, SOUTHCENTRAL FOUNDATION

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: PROTECTING YOU, PROTECTING ME, ANGIE WRIGHT, NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOL AND DRUG DEPENDENCE

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

KATHERINE GOTTLIEB, President and CEO
Southcentral Foundation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation.

DON SHUGAK

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation.

EDNA SHUGAK

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation.

STEVE WILLIS

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation.

JEANNIE WILLIS

No address provided

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation.

ACTION NARRATIVE

CHAIR WILSON announced that she was adjourning the recessed 4/26/05 meeting, which had never reconvened.

[3:07:41 PM](#)

CHAIR PEGGY WILSON called the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at [3:07:25 PM](#). Representatives Kohring, Gardner, and Cissna were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION: FAMILY WELLNESS WARRIORS INITIATIVE, SOUTHCENTRAL FOUNDATION

CHAIR WILSON announced that the first order of business was the presentation of the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative, Southcentral Foundation.

[3:09:23 PM](#)

KATHERINE GOTTLIEB, President and CEO, Southcentral Foundation (SCF), said SCF is a \$110 million Alaska Native/American Indian primary care organization that "runs a primary care center and other community activities around Anchorage and [the Matanuska/Susitna (MatSu)] Valley." She reviewed the area in which SCF operates clinics. She said the organization receives federal, state, and foundation funds, and it generates third-party revenue through Medicaid and Medicare. Ms. Gottlieb indicated that the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is funded through SCF, Rasmussen, Paul Allen, the Alaska Native Health

Board, and the Department of Justice. She reported that SCF has contributed approximately \$885,000 for the last three years.

MS. GOTTLIEB revealed that she is a "child of war." She asked the committee members to imagine: At the age of five, she witnessed her father getting hit and blood splattering at her feet, and she witnessed her mother being beaten by a stranger. She was also a child subject to abuse and neglect; when she tried to tell her mother what was happening, her mother slapped her across the face and called her a wicked child. She explained the reason for her mother's actions was because she, too, was a child of domestic violence, child abuse, and child neglect, and because of that became an alcoholic who died when Ms. Gottlieb was 12 years old. Ms. Gottlieb stated it is by the grace of God that she is not also an alcoholic. She said:

It's only ... after many years of counseling, after a long internal walk of spiritual and emotional growth, after watching many ... people live out the same war, after becoming a mother of six and grandmother of twenty, I made a determination as an Alaska Native person: I'm about breaking the silence. I'm not going to sit back; ... I'm not going to just let it happen to my children, or my cousins, or any of my relatives. And the beginning walk of this is to start by telling my story. And that's part of what the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is about.

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DON SHUGAK described his beginnings in Old Harbor. He said it was a beautiful place when alcohol wasn't there, but when it was introduced it tore up the structure of his family and others. He related that his own father was verbally and physically abusive. Mr. Shugak said he was the oldest of 10 children. He related an incident which resulted in one of his sisters going to the hospital. He said his father was suffering from issues that were a result of his own abuse growing up; the abuse moved from one generation to the next. He said God somehow gave him the ability to see that the way he was growing up was not normal, and ever since he has looked for ways to address these issues. He agreed with Ms. Gottlieb's use of the term, "children of war."

MR. SHUGAK said he became involved with Family Wellness Warriors three years ago after being told about it by Ms. Gottlieb. He said initially he thought the organization was just for women's

issues, adding, "When you grow up in a village ... that's just the way it is." Mr. Shugak said Ms. Gottlieb called him out to be a warrior, which called to him. He said he had become abusive to his children and they suffer for that today. For example, because he told them they were stupid, they have trouble studying today. He said his wife told him he needed to choose between his anger and his family. He said he chose to address the issues in his life and become a warrior for his family. He said up to 80 percent of people in Alaska's villages have been abused in some way.

MR. SHUGAK said Family Wellness Warriors began getting recognition in the state about four years ago and helped popularize the idea of breaking silence through the media.

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EDNA SHUGAK testified that she was raised in a small village on Lake Iliamna and, while working in Anchorage, she asked God for a husband and met Don Shugak soon after. She described the beginning of their marriage, saying that they married so quickly that she didn't know him well. She said her own father died when she was five years old, so she didn't have a father role model and did not see how a husband would behave. She said she and her husband attended bible school together. Ms. Shugak said her husband would become angry and lose control, but when asked about it later, he would say he didn't remember. She said her husband was a pastor for three years and then a teacher. When he came home, he expected her to keep the children quiet.

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MS. SHUGAK said it seemed the older her husband got the angrier and more critical he became. She said she wanted her son and daughter to grow up in a safe home, but it seemed to become increasingly unsafe. She expressed that her husband seemed to be missing an opportunity to raise his son into a man, and their son, who had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), was withdrawing. She described her existence as a lonely one with no intimacy or trust with her husband, and she said there were nights when she wanted to run away. She confirmed Mr. Shugak's testimony that she gave him an ultimatum between choosing his anger or his family. Now that Mr. Shugak doesn't have his anger anymore, Mrs. Shugak said, their marriage is richer. She said she and her husband have spoken at length with their children about the bad times, and she and her husband tell their story to others.

She concluded, "I cannot tell you the amount of people that come up and they tell me, 'That's my story.'"

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STEVE WILLIS stated that it is not easy for him to speak before the committee, because one thing the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is about is ending abuse and he was an abuser. Mr. Willis stated that he is the son of a missionary family. At the age of 13 he left home for high school and attended five different high schools in four years. At the age of six, he revealed, he was exposed to sexual abuse by peers, but had nowhere to turn, because there was an abusive atmosphere at home. He said, "I know that early on my mother suspected something, but I knew what would happen if I owned up to what was going on and, out of fear, I kept it quiet." From his early years through high school, one side of him lived as a church boy doing things he ought to do, while the other was drinking, carousing, smoking, and doing as he pleased. He said he isn't proud of that at all.

MR. WILLIS said his first marriage was at 18, lasted 11 years, and produced two children. He met his current wife, Jeannie Willis, and described her as his princess. He said he never had any intention of hurting her, but the use of alcohol in the home "set the stage for lowered inhibitions and bouts and fits of anger." He spoke of an instance when he crossed the line and hit his wife, which made her afraid of him. He said they raised three children. He said that although he thought he kept the anger directed at their mother camouflaged, they could see it. He said his oldest daughter couldn't wait to leave home at 15 or 16 years old.

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MR. WILLIS said the family changed directions in its life, moving out of a little village and into a larger town where they attended church and started cutting back on alcohol, finally giving it up. However, the damage that was done still existed. Mr. Willis said he was invited to a Family Wellness Warriors conference. On the application form there were categories to fill out and Mr. Willis said, "I didn't feel that any of them applied to me because I'd never been abused." He still attended and discovered "a lot of the things that cause what later developed into an abusive lifestyle."

MR. WILLIS said his son was a teenager at the time and wanted to be out of the house. He said his son was a tough, idealistic, and honest young man who would stand up against him and "almost get in my face and stay in my space." He told his son he wanted to give him the opportunity to speak his mind. His son broke down into tears and said, "You beat my mama, and she couldn't stand up against you, but I have to." He expressed his thanks to the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative program for making him cognizant of what was going on and giving him the strength to allow his son his freedom and voice, and to stop the pattern of abuse.

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JEANNIE WILLIS said she grew up with 12 siblings and, as a child, saw things she shouldn't have. She watched as her parents got drunk and her dad hit her mom and as her brothers got drunk and fought in the house as all the little children screamed, cried, telling them to stop. She said she saw her friends run from their own houses to neighbors to escape fighting in their houses. She said most of those times were brought about because of alcohol. Ms. Willis said cleaning her mother's bloody nose and trying to get her to bed in order to get up in time to get the children to school was embarrassing, cleaning up broken dishes and furniture made her angry, and hearing people gossip, thinking that she wasn't listening was humiliating. She said she began putting up walls and pretending these things were not happening.

MS. WILLIS said she married at 21 and, after a couple years, the marriage headed downhill. She stated that her husband was unfaithful and physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive. She said, "His rage was so bad that I feared for my well-being." She said she hid in her house because of her black eyes and hid the things that her children did wrong because the punishment would be too much. She hid the fact that she was unhappy and hid financial mistakes, because if her husband found out he would turn into a "raging maniac." She said, "My husband would not hurt our kids intentionally, but the emotional abuse was done without him even knowing it." She continued, "I wouldn't hurt my kids intentionally, either, but when I got to the point of giving up all of my dreams, I stole their dreams, too."

MS. WILLIS said she and her family moved out of the village in 1996 and decided to clean up their lives. In January 2004, she said, "We went to the conference that was put on by Family Wellness Warriors Initiative," which she said was a great

turning point in her life. She emphasized the importance of looking at past damage in order to figure out "why you are who you are today." She stated, "My husband and I gave up that past life and are on our journey to healing. We do give a lot of credit to Family Wellness Warriors Initiative ...; it helped us think about things from our past and to start working through it." Ms. Willis said she cannot help thinking about all the people who are going through a life similar to ours - all the people in Alaska who have been through past damage and don't realize how it is affecting them today.

[3:45:40 PM](#)

MS. GOTTLIEB said SCF runs adolescent, youth, and residential treatment programs. She also mentioned an adult facility, which she said the state funds. Every resident who has used the services of SCF has issues with child abuse and neglect. She said SCF runs a huge behavioral health facility that has provided services to over 40,000 Alaska Natives, 70-75 percent of whom report domestic violence and child abuse/neglect in their background. People medicate with alcohol to bury those things within them relating to domestic violence and child abuse/neglect. She stated, "Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is not just another program; it's a movement. We are taking hold of child sexual abuse, child neglect, and domestic violence, and we're breaking the silence." She said it's an Alaska Native-led initiative that is changing a belief system that encourages domestic violence, abuse, and neglect as socially acceptable and tolerable. She said the movement has been endorsed by Alaska Native communities, councils, and statewide governing bodies through resolutions. She said Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is in the doors of villages, churches, communities, families, and individuals; it provides the means for full discussion of all the issues around domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. The initiative is creating a safe umbrella of village community adults and training Alaskans to be competent, skilled, and equipped to respond to prevent child abuse, neglect, and domestic violence.

MS. GOTTLIEB concluded as follows:

I went to ... [the] surgeon general's workshop ..., [which] was around making prevention of child maltreatment a national priority. And he was there for two days. He listened to about 100 of us across the nation, by invitation, around the issues of domestic violence, child abuse, neglect, child

maltreatment. And when I got up to speak I told him [and the people that were there] a little bit of my story ..., and said if he wants to make ... child maltreatment a national priority, and if this body of professionals wants to make child maltreatment a national priority, then I would encourage professionals and people around to talk about how they've been harmed ... and even the harm that they have done. Because it's not just about low income, [minorities], or Alaska Natives. And the surgeon got up and in his closing remarks he made me cry, because he told his story. It was very powerful. So, that's what Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is about.

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CHAIR WILSON expressed her appreciation for the work of the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative and said that those involved who are brave enough to tell their story truly are warriors.

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REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER shared that one of the things that has always troubled her is when rural children are held in state custody in Anchorage. She said sometimes they have been transferred there for treatment, but many times their families have brought them into the city for other reasons and "they come to the attention of somebody and come into custody." She said she worries about children from a small place who not only are yanked away from their families, but also are in culture shock in a new school and eating different foods, for example. She said, "It's a short-term fix, maybe, for that child, balanced by a lot of harm that's also being done." She asked Ms. Gottlieb if she has any suggestions as to what to do with these children.

MS. GOTTLIEB said currently some of the nonprofit organizations are involved; they are working specifically with children who are under state custody. She said SCF is not specifically involved in that world; it is targeting the adults and the environment to become safer. She said, "So, it's a partnership connecting with people who are dealing with the children that are involved in this picture." She interpreted Representative Gardner as saying [the goal has not yet been met], and she said she doesn't have an answer for her.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER said that in her work as guardian ad litem she learned that people really can and do change,

sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways. She offered an example.

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MS. GOTTLIEB reemphasized making the environment safe for the children before coming to talk with them.

REPRESENTATIVE GARDNER asked what could have made Ms. Gottlieb's own experience different.

MS. GOTTLIEB answered, "A family like this who's ready to break the silence, change their lives, and take control of their community."

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REPRESENTATIVE CISSNA thanked those who had testified and told them that it is an honor that they trusted the committee to hear their story. She said it sounds like the Family Wellness Warrior Initiative is about people helping people, which is where things have to start.

MS. GOTTLIEB noted that SCF held a conference in Fairbanks which 150 people [attended] and during which 32 lay people who had been trained came and volunteered 10 days of their time.

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REPRESENTATIVE KOHRING expressed his thanks for the previous testimony. He reminded those in the room and all other listeners that women can be perpetrators of abuse, as well. He said it seems society is moving in the direction of "portraying the man as the bad person in the household."

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MS. GOTTLIEB said in the conferences, both men and women are telling their stories of being abusers. She said Family Wellness Warriors Initiative is asking men to be the front line of protection. She said, "We have been calling out the warriors and they have been rising. It's a big deal."

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MS. GOTTLIEB announced that training is available, the web site is www.southcentralfoundation.com, and people can request more

information or find out how to get involved by calling 1-800-478-3343. In response to a question from Chair Wilson, she said the state could provide help to the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative, by endorsing it as one of the effective movements in the state. She said the organization has been partnering with the Department of Corrections.

CHAIR WILSON concluded, "We'll see what we can do."

[4:00:59 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health, Education and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at [4:01:03 PM](#).