

**Juvenile Welfare Board**



The Children's Services Council  
of Pinellas County

Regular Board Meeting

June 11, 2009

Item IV.J

JWB Children's Services Council

# News Clips

**tampabay.com** Know it now.

## Free tax prep nets many happy returns

By Waveney Ann Moore, Times Staff Writer

Published Friday, May 15, 2009

---

Braids draping her back, Elisheba Weathers bustled from kitchen to dining table dishing out whole wheat spaghetti, salad, steamed broccoli and slices of bread to her husband and two youngest children in their modest Childs Park home.

Her husband, Milton, 55, said grace, thanking God for his blessings and for Elisheba's cooking. Unsaid at that moment was the family's gratitude for the much-needed income tax refund coming their way.

Elisheba, 50, was laid off recently. Even with her unemployment benefits and Milton's two jobs as a maintenance worker, it's a strain to keep up with the mortgage and other expenses. So when it was time to do their taxes this year, they turned to a free tax service offered by the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program in Pinellas County. Nearly 2,700 others did the same.

Community advocates are pleased. They say efforts to encourage low- and moderate-income residents to take advantage of the free income tax preparation service netted \$4.5 million in refunds for Pinellas County residents and, by extension, the area's economy. Of that sum, \$1.7 million came from federal earned income tax credits, a benefit for low- and moderate-income workers that offsets the payroll and income taxes they pay.

Nationally, in 2007, 23.1 million eligible families and individuals claimed earned income tax credits worth \$44.6 billion, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Cherin L. Stover, coordinator of the Wealth Building Coalition of Pinellas County, which administered 12 VITA sites from Tarpon Springs to St. Petersburg in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service, said the economy sent new people to the program this year.

"We had people coming into the sites who had normally paid to have their taxes done but said that this year they simply could not afford it," she said.

Four IRS-trained workers at the James B. Sanderlin Neighborhood Family Center in St. Petersburg prepared more than 800 returns, with \$780,968 in earned income tax credits, the highest for any free tax site in the Tampa Bay area. At Daystar Life Center, a site for the first time this year, more than 100 low-income clients were served.

Still, Stover of the Wealth Building Coalition said, even though most recent IRS figures indicate that 60 percent of workers in Pinellas County qualify for an earned income tax credit, only 25 percent claim it. Of those who did, 46 percent spent money for tax preparation and to take out high-interest refund-anticipation loans.

Until this year, with three jobs between them, the Weatherses paid to have their taxes done.

"Because I got laid off, I'm trying to pinch pennies everywhere I can," Elisheba Weathers said. "I said, even if we only get \$100, let's go where we do it for free and at least we'll have a \$100. That's what led us to go to Daystar."

The economy might have pushed other penny-pinching Americans into doing their own taxes this year. In a recent release, the IRS said that for the first time, more than 30 million tax returns were filed from home computers, up 19.3 percent from the same time last year.

The decision to take advantage of the free tax preparation service paid off for Milton and Elisheba Weathers.

"We're supposed to be getting back \$2,000," she said. "The most we have gotten back is \$62."

She and her husband credit Andrea Dufresne, 23, a first year student at Stetson University College of Law in Gulfport, for the windfall. They say Dufresne made sure they got education credits for their college student daughter and child credits for the youngest of their four children. Last year's \$62,000 income was too high for them to get earned income tax credit.

Nevertheless, the couple is ecstatic about their refund.

Dufresne, whom they described as "caring and concerned," said the volunteer work counted toward her pro bono requirements for law school, but that it wasn't the reason she signed up to work with the program.

"I wanted to do something to help other people. It was something that I really enjoyed," she said, adding that when she learned that the Daystar tax site was short of volunteers, she encouraged a classmate to help also.

Jane Trocheck Walker, executive director at Daystar, said the tax site helped mostly very poor people, including some of the 800 clients who use the center as a mailing address. They are people who either have no stable address or live in neighborhoods where their mail is not safe, she said.

Stover, of the Wealth Building Coalition, said that as a first-time site, Daystar was a success.

"They were able to reach people we were not able to reach in the past," she said.

Many had an adjusted gross income of about \$15,000.

"We really did reach those in most economic need," she said.

*Waveney Ann Moore can be reached at [wmoore@sptimes.com](mailto:wmoore@sptimes.com) or (727) 892-2283.*

### **Fast Facts**

Pinellas dividends

2,697 Tax returns prepared at free tax preparation sites

**\$1.7 million** Earned income tax credits, up \$131,800 from 2008

**\$740,337** Child tax credits, up \$40,737 from 2008

**\$4.5 million** Total refunds, up \$500,000-plus from 2008

**\$404,550** Saved in tax filing fees (based on calculation system used by the Brookings Institution)

Source: Wealth Building Coalition of Pinellas County

#### **Wealth Building Coalition**

Established in July 2002 to help eligible residents claim federal earned income tax credit and child credit and to increase economic opportunities and provide financial education. Partners include the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board, the IRS, FDIC, Federal Reserve Bank, Bank of America, Wachovia, United Way of Tampa Bay, the National Disability Institute and WorkNet Pinellas. Go to [wbcpc.org](http://wbcpc.org) or call (727) 321-9444.

---

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111  
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)

**tampabay.com** Know it now.

## The parenting coach

By Ron Matus, Times Staff Writer

Published Saturday, May 16, 2009

---

The Supernanny of Pinellas County speaks with a Puerto Rican accent, not a British one. She flies into modest apartment complexes, not suburban palaces. But like her reality TV counterpart, Charlene Simons holds one of the most overlooked jobs around. She makes parents better. Every week, the certified parenting instructor visits 15 to 20 Pinellas parents, dispensing advice in one-on-one sessions. Simons' charges are often single. They've often had run-ins with the law. But when Simons shows up in her Hyundai Santa Fe (no chauffeured London Executive Sedan for her) they get some of the same, life-changing lessons as the well-to-do couples rescued by Supernanny.

At Krystle Butler's home in Pinellas Park, Simons sets up a hypothetical. Say your 7-year-old is playing ball in the house when he's not supposed to. What do you do?

"Say, 'Go play with the ball outside,' " says Butler, 23. "Not yelling."

"Not yelling. That's right!"

Simons and Butler high five. For families, little victories add up.

They add up for schools, too. Even if Simons and the other supernannies of the world rarely set foot in them.

...

You hear it every time, after every story about struggling students or struggling schools.

*It's the parents' fault.*

The pointed fingers rarely become helping hands. But some social workers and educators think there is a way to help parents.

Teach them.

"I don't think there are bad parents. I think there are parents who make poor choices," says Simons, 37, a single mother of three and a parenting educator for 13 years. "Many don't know how to do it. They don't know any better. That's the way they were raised."

Some schools try to teach parents what they call the basics. Ask your kids about homework. Make them a good breakfast. But follow a student who's perpetually floundering, and he'll often lead you to parents who need more fundamental help.

Simons met one mother who bailed her son out of jail, then bought him \$200 worth of Tommy Hilfiger gear. She's helping another whose own father beat her and stuffed her into coolers.

The second woman gives her kids homemade cupcakes. But she's still wrestling with so much rage, she blacks out when they upset her. Tears fall as she tells Simons, "I may not be the parent my father was, but I'm going to have to do something."

Around Tampa Bay, a hodgepodge of parenting programs offer counseling and classes to make mom and dad more patient, more tuned in, more nurturing. Some are run by churches and hospitals. Some by nonprofit and government agencies.

Few are directly tied in to schools.

Simons and six other "family support workers" are part of a program called Childnet. It's run by Family Service Centers, a Clearwater nonprofit group, and funded primarily by the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County and the United Way of Tampa Bay. It helps 330 families a year.

Most of the families are referred by child protection investigators, but the parents sign up voluntarily. The workers visit each home once a week for six to 12 months, usually for an hour or two at a time.

Many participants are tentative at first. They fear being told, *You're a bad parent.*

The Supernanny of Pinellas tells them, *You're the lucky ones.*

...

When Simons' second child was 3, he swept his little arm across a shelf full of vitamin bottles and sent them crashing to the floor of a grocery store. Simons broke down on the spot. She didn't know what to do. Christopher cried a lot. He had a temper. A well-meaning woman asked Simons if she had her son tested for attention deficit disorder.

The incident was a turning point.

"When I got home, I said, 'You know what? I need to educate myself,'" says Simons, who has a degree in social work.

She began reading books on child rearing. She bought crayons and paints. She bought basketballs and volleyballs. Anything to channel her son's energy into something positive. "Instead of washing dishes, we were outside playing with clay," she says.

People at Simons' church noticed the mom carrying drawing pads and markers. They began to ask for advice. Simons started a parent support group.

She was already organizing community fairs and doing breast-feeding workshops. She added more parenting education to her repertoire. When she moved to Florida five years ago, she became certified.

"I'm just a parent, just like any other parent," she says.

Mistakes? All the time.

When she catches one, she stops and tells her kids, "You know what this is an example of?" They've heard it so often they answer in a monotone chorus.

"What NOT to do,"

...

The 7-year-old was disrupting class. He didn't want to read unless the teacher sat next to him. He wanted his teacher to look at him, talk to him.

Krystle Butler says the problem wasn't her son. It was her.

"Now that I'm spending more time and attention with him, he's progressing," says Butler, a customer service rep at a Macy's call center.

Simons says most of the parents she works with have kids with problems in school. Not following rules. Not listening. Maybe not going to school at all.

Once, the State Attorney's Office referred her to the parent of a 9-year-old. The woman said her daughter kept missing the bus because she was spending too much time in the bathroom getting ready.

Simons suggested a tighter schedule and clearer expectations.

Maybe schools should refer more parents like that, she says. Maybe they should offer more parenting classes themselves. To the students.

"They're going to form a family one day," she says. And unless someone teaches them otherwise, many will do the same things their parents did.

Butler can relate. "I was raised up with whuppings," she says.

But now? Now, she says, she doesn't spank. She shouts less. She follows through with promises.

As they sit together at the dinner table, Simons offers tips and what-ifs. She talks alternatives and consequences.

*Don't nag your kids. Be honest with them. Explain instead of just saying no.*

"How do you say 'stop running' in a positive way?" she asks.

"Can you please walk?" Butler says.

"That's it. Positive message."

...

Butler's 5-year-old pitter-pats to the table. A rainbow of hair clips. Hands full of crayons.



"Can you draw me something?"

Not now, Butler says gently. "I'll do it when I finish," she promises.

"Okay." The girl smiles as she shuffles back to her room.

"I'm so proud of you," Simons says. "It wasn't like that when we started."

Mom shakes her head and laughs.

No, it wasn't.

*Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report. Ron Matus can be reached at [matus@sptimes.com](mailto:matus@sptimes.com) or (727) 893-8873.*

---

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111  
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)



**tampabay.com** Know it now.

## Largo's Southwest Recreation Complex holds grand reopening Saturday

Published Friday, May 22, 2009

---

### Largo

#### Southwest Rec Complex holds grand reopening

Largo's Southwest Recreation Complex, 13120 Vonn Road, is reopening after being under renovation since September 2008. Check out the new rooms, including areas for fitness, aerobics, dance, child care and more at a celebration from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. The free event will include refreshments. For information, call (727) 518-3125.

#### Alzheimer's support group meets Thursday

Barrington Terrace, 333 16th Ave. SE, will hold its monthly Alzheimer's support group meeting at 6 p.m. Thursday. It is designed as a family support group. If you need day care for a loved one during the event, reservations are required. Call (727) 588-0020.

#### Summer fun awaits teens at rec centers

Largo Recreation, Parks and Arts has camps designed for teens.

They can hang out with buddies this summer at Highland Rec Center for Cool Kids II, Southwest Rec Center at Kid City II, or Bayhead Complex for Physicians of Fun. These camps will include themed activities, sports, swimming and field trips.

Camps will be from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. starting June 8. Juvenile Welfare Board scholarships are still available for qualified participants ages 10 and up. For registration and information, call (727) 518-3125 or (727) 518-3016.

---

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111  
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)

**tampabay.com** Know it now.

## Property owners can't bear another tax hike for Pinellas schools

Published Monday, May 25, 2009

---

### Tax for schools hiked? Not again

Here we go again. We are being informed that the Pinellas County School Board will have lengthy discussions as to whether to raise property taxes for the next two years, as our useless Florida Legislature gave them the right to do so.

The chairwoman stated that since the voters offered (not a good word) additional monies through the school tax referendum, which was for one-half mill, property owners might not look kindly at voting for that again.

I did not vote for Amendment 1, nor did I vote for the referendum. How many assaults (referendums) does one have to endure on property tax pillaging? Property owners naturally expect to pay taxes, but some of us wonder why we seem to be the main source of whatever silliness (i.e. choice busing) that comes along.

The School Board should open its books. Many are curious as to how the monies are spent. Increasing property taxes for the sole purpose of schools is almost as divisive as the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board feeding at the trough. Enough already.

**Mrs. Harriet P. Sherwood, Clearwater**

### Access to post office is limited

Have you ever noticed that there is no handicapped access at the Dunedin Post Office, on State Road 580 and San Christopher Drive?

I'm sure our good citizens in wheelchairs have noticed, or customers carrying an armful of packages.

The U.S. Postal Service states, "The existing facility meets Postal Service standards." Of all government services, the postal department refuses to update the facility to meet ADA requirements for the handicapped. Hard to believe they are taking that position.

The Dunedin facility is a leased building. The lease expires in 2012. Let's band together as private citizens and raise the money. Dunedin does a lot of good for its citizens; let's give a little back. I will put up the first \$100 toward the project.

Please e-mail Bill Coleman at [wjcoleman@aol.com](mailto:wjcoleman@aol.com) if you are willing to help.

**Bill Coleman, Dunedin**

### **Beware rituals of Scientology**

So, is the *St. Petersburg Times* a recruiting partner of Scientology now? A mailer in the newspaper touting the Church of Scientology's "purification rundown" is not the responsible thing to do for the welfare of your readers.

What is the purification rundown? It is a scam, plain and simple. Even if it worked, which it doesn't, it has absolutely nothing to do with religion. How can taking a bunch of pills, hopping on a treadmill and jumping into a sauna be a religious experience?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says it is a useless program and can possibly be dangerous. Beware, it is just a recruiting tool.

**Dave Rodman, Dunedin**

### **>>your voice counts**

You may submit a letter to the editor for possible publication through our Web site at [www.tampabay.com/letters](http://www.tampabay.com/letters), or by faxing it to (727) 445-4119, or by mailing it to Letters, 710 Court St., Clearwater, FL 33756. You must include your name, address and phone number. Letters may be edited for clarity, taste and length.

---

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times  
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111  
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)

## Court's Ground-Breaking Truancy Program Now in 12 Pinellas Middle Schools

The Sixth Judicial Circuit's Truancy Magistrate Court, initiated as a pilot program in 2006, now provides oversight of school-skipping students at 12 Pinellas middle schools. Modeled after a Rhode Island program and funded with a grant from the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas, the program sends a magistrate into the schools to conduct hearings for students with chronic absentee rates.

Students at participating schools are given an opportunity to participate if a truancy petition has been filed against them for 15 or more unexcused absences within a 90-day period. Parents who choose not to participate are summoned to court, where a judge uses state truancy laws to deal with the parent and child. Truancy Magistrate Court's goal is to divert the family from the court system to social services that will re-route the child toward a successful academic career.

Truancy Magistrate Carmen Follis is available a half day each week at eight schools and every other week at four others, conducting initial hearings for newly identified truants and status checks on students previously referred to the program. In the initial phases, parents are required to attend with students.

By targeting middle school truancy, it is hoped that the even more serious truancy and dropout rates in area high schools will be improved. Follis refers to studies showing convicted criminals released from prison the first time are 50% less likely to commit a violent crime if they have a high school diploma or graduate equivalency diploma (GED). Police departments also cite the frequency of kids committing criminal acts while skipping school.

Circuit Judges Frank Quesada and Irene Sullivan began exploring the idea of Truancy Magistrate Court several years ago when they realized that by the time truants were coming to court, many of them had amassed more than 70 unexcused absences within a school year. "We realized we were just dealing with the tip of the iceberg," Judge Sullivan says. "We were not picking them up quick enough."

With the Juvenile Welfare Board funds, the Administrative Office of the Courts contracts with Follis and Family

Resources for 2.75 case workers. Since being tried at five schools in the second semester of the 05-06 school year, the program has grown each year.

Both Judge Sullivan and Follis say that truancy is a sign of deeper problems and that the case workers are important in rooting out those problems and getting the children with appropriate treatment providers. Judge Sullivan says, "It's a symptom of something else... environment, drug problems, low self esteem, undiagnosed learning disabilities, poverty... they all can be the cause."

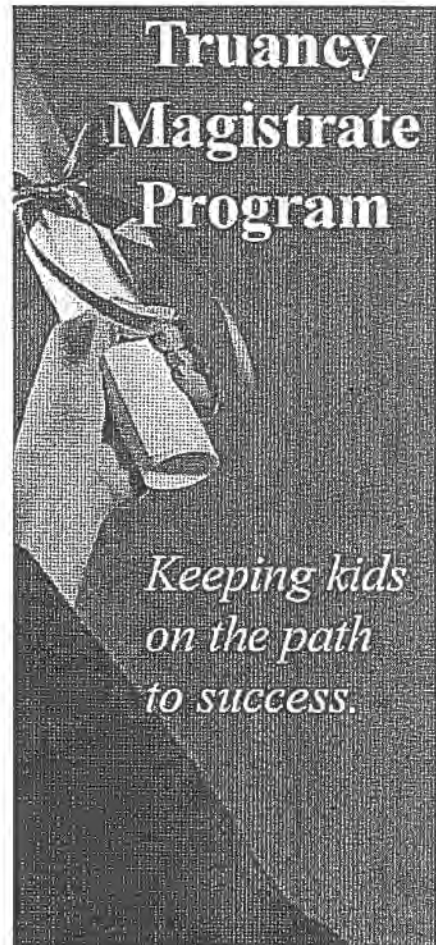
While participation is voluntary, Follis's hearings are official court proceedings. Parents and truants sign documents indicating they understand the consequence of missed hearings or non-compliance with other requirements. Such failures will result in a summons that takes the student and parents before a judge.

Follis has seen her share of families with needs. She was formerly an FBI agent in New York City who also worked at Gulfcoast Legal Services. At Gulfcoast, she was in the family law section, representing battered women in dissolution and injunction matters. Her juris doctorate is from New York Law School, and she earned a bachelor's in English writing/literature at Fairfield University.

Follis says many of the truants are "kids falling through the cracks while the people in this large school system are working to save all the kids." At the first hearing, she lays out attendance and class performance goals that are tailored to each child, always requiring the child and parent "to fully cooperate with Family Resources case managers, who may schedule home visits, conduct evaluations and/or recommend services." She also designates an in-school mentor for truancy, and attempts are made to link children with scholarship opportunities, in-school activities and new hobbies.

"We have very dedicated principals, teachers, attendance specialists, social workers," she says. "Everyone makes us feel very welcome in Pinellas County's schools."

If she finds that certain controllable factors are affecting the child's atten-



dance, she might order no contact with people with a criminal record, abidance to all home and school rules, nightly curfew of 7 p.m., and obtaining teacher signatures confirming on-time attendance.

The involvement part of Magistrate Truancy Court effects Judge Sullivan's primary mantra for helping troubled kids—"It's all about engagement!," she says. Judge Sullivan declares that connecting the parents, social workers, teachers, etc., to the child and getting the child to open up is an essential element of "saving the child." She terms it the "Triple A's remedy: Attachment, Attendance & Achievement."

"Often, it's just a matter of improving the parent-child relationship," Follis says. 