

Testimony of
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Field Hearing
Senate Judiciary Committee

Value of Mentoring for Philadelphia Youth

Statement for the Record

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Good morning. My name is Jennifer Carroll and I am the Director of Match Support for Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern, PA. I'm pleased to represent Big Brothers Big Sisters and to speak to the value of mentoring in reducing youth violence.

I would like to start by thanking Senator Specter for inviting Big Brothers Big Sisters to testify today and for bringing attention to the challenges facing the youth in our city. I would also like to thank the Senator for his long and strong support of mentoring and to acknowledge the work of his Appropriation Subcommittee in funding mentoring initiatives, specifically the Mentoring Children of Prisoners and Mentoring for Success programs. Our organization is a HHS Mentoring Children of Prisoners grantee, and it is no exaggeration to say that that funding was a catalyst in transforming us to where we are today--one of the largest Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliates in the nation, and one of the top non-profits in our region according to Charity Navigator.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge the other governmental and non-profit organizations--some of whom are represented here today at this hearing--that have worked with us to support and strengthen mentoring programs in Philadelphia.

Big Brothers Big Sisters works on behalf of the thousands of children, families and volunteer mentors in our program: we know first-hand the power of mentoring. We are the largest BBBS affiliate in Pennsylvania and have served children in Philadelphia for over 90 years. We make and support one-to-one relationships between at-risk children and volunteer mentors, and we know about the power that these friends and role models can have in young lives.

In 2006, we served 2900 children--the vast majority of them from Philadelphia. Our near-term goal is to serve 5000 children annually, because we know that the need in our community is great. In fact, we have more than 1300 children currently on our waiting list--the majority of

them young boys living here in Philadelphia. In a city where 180,000 children ages 14 and older had eight or more absences last year ; where half of 9th graders don't graduate on time ; and where the number of murders involving young males continues to skyrocket, it is clear that we need to do more to support the youth in our community. And mentoring is one approach that can help.

More to the point, we know that the way to build a strong future for children is by engaging everyone in the community--and mentoring is a powerful tool for engaging adults for the benefit of at-risk youth. In our work, we tend to emphasize--rightfully so--the children that benefit from our mentoring programs. But we would also like to point out one enormously impressive fact about BBBS mentoring--namely, behind each one of our nearly 3000 children served last year is a volunteer mentor--someone who stands up and volunteers to give to their community. We ask our volunteers to meet with their Littles for 2-4 hours per month, for a minimum of a year. The total volunteer time--roughly 144,000 hours a year--is impressive, and an unsung testimony to the volunteer spirit. We know that engaging adults in our community in the lives of children, is vital if we are to build Philadelphia into the great city that it deserves to be.

Other panelists today can emphasize the research documenting the positive impact of mentoring. What I want to emphasize are the steps that we take to make mentoring work. And I also want to share just a few of the many stories that we hear daily at BBBS SEPA. We see the impact of mentoring every day, in the friendships that have been developed and in the lives that have been changed. We see how the steady presence of a mentor can provide new perspectives and experiences for a child that can literally change the arc of their lives.

Big Brother Kenny and 12-year old Israel had been matched for three years in Philadelphia's BBBS Amachi program when they heard the siren. Israel stopped dribbling the basketball and quietly told his Big Brother, "They're coming to arrest my father again; he's doing bad things." Kenny took his Little Brother home and found that Israel's suspicions were correct. Israel's father returned to prison that day--another in a string of increasingly serious offenses. During the years that Israel's father has been in and out of prison, his Big Brother has been a steady presence in his life; through basketball games, movies, and times spent just hanging out, Kenny is helping Israel to chart a path in life different from that of his father. Israel, now nearly 16, plans on becoming a police officer after he graduates from high-school.

Since the beginning of BBBS mentoring over a century ago, our organization has focused on at-risk youth like Israel--usually children from single-parent families, growing up in depressed economic situations.

Traditionally, children were enrolled in our programs when their parents reached out to us and asked us to find a mentor for their child. Today, many of the 1300 children on our waiting list are there precisely because their parents believe that a mentor can make a positive difference in the life of their child, and so have asked for our help.

But, as we have expanded our programs, we have learned that some of the children who need our help most are those who are NOT on our waiting list. And, in these cases, we actively recruit children by talking to parents, grandparents, and other caregivers. In these cases, we look for children who have already begun to demonstrate some of the patterns of behavior that indicate future problems--patterns of truancy or delinquency, for instance, or children who are the victims or perpetrators of violence. Our Amachi program, which targets children who have a parent in prison, is a prime example of this sort of outreach to children who might otherwise not be enrolled in our programs.

Today, we serve children from 6-18--though our strong preference is to match children before the

age of 13. Based on census estimates of the number of children living at or below poverty level, we estimate that there are over 80,000 children in Philadelphia who would be classified as "at-risk" because of these factors.

As we have grown over the years--more than doubling the number of children we serve annually since 2002--we have had to spend more time recruiting mentors for our programs. We know we need to match more of the children on our waiting list. Just last week, one of our local newspaper columnists did a story on a 13-year old Nasheed, who was just matched with a Big Brother. Nasheed has been on our waiting list since he was 8. As a result of that story, we have had nearly 50 inquiries from individuals interested in becoming a Big Brother. We are working to highlight the need and the value of mentoring so that more men like Nasheed's new Big Brother Nathaniel Tillman step up.

We are aggressively reaching out in our neighborhoods--in churches, colleges, businesses, and social organizations to inspire people to share their lives with children and to become mentors. We have partnerships with over 60 local churches and congregations, and draw mentors from the church members. Our recruiting team works with these churches and with other fraternal and social organizations to engage them as mentors. We work with colleges and universities to encourage students to become Big Brothers and Big Sisters to children in elementary and middle schools near the college campus. Corporations support us by encouraging their employees to become mentors as well. We started new programs with Cigna and Wawa, where children go to these corporate headquarters to meet their "Bigs". And, In fact, we are working with Police Commissioner Johnson and Fire Commissioner Lloyd Akers to recruit mentors from their ranks. We have a continuing need for African-American men to become mentors, and are implementing targeted recruiting efforts to address this need.

The obstacles are often tied to lack of visibility and understanding about what is required of a mentor. We work to counter the image that a person has to be a "saint" or a CEO in order to be a good mentor by emphasizing that everyone has experiences, insights, and interests that are valuable for children. In fact, we are currently working on campaigns to emphasize that the "average joe" has so much to offer children. We're not looking for perfection--we're looking for good people who are willing to commit to spending time with a child.

The BBBS model of mentoring has been around for over 100 years. We know how to make mentoring work so that the relationships between a child and adult are safe, strong, and impactful. We know that the way to build strong, safe, and impactful relationships is through careful screening of mentors and through professional support of the relationships after the match is made. The P/PV research on mentoring emphasizes that mentoring works when the mentors, children, and family are supported by professional staff according to the BBBS model. The worst thing an organization can do is to make a match and walk away--the BBBS mentoring model works because our staff is there to provide insight, guidance, and advice as the mentoring relationship develops through different stages. Asking our volunteers to commit to meeting with their Little Brother or Little Sister regularly for a period of a year is important: both our own experience and multiple research studies confirm a correlation between positive impact and the length and regularity of the mentoring relationship. And, for each volunteer who commits to spending time with a child, we also commit to doing what we can to help keep the mentoring relationship strong. And we are pleased that, currently, 63% of our nearly 2100 open matches have lasted 12 months or longer.

We know there will continue to be challenges. Steady, reliable funding is a perpetual source of concern for us and other organizations serving children. But in a city where millions are spent on

incarceration, surely we can find the financial and political will to ensure the future of our children. The reality is that mentoring is a cost-effective intervention--the cost of making and professionally supporting a one-to-one relationship for a year is a mere fraction of the cost of juvenile incarceration.

Beyond prioritizing mentoring through funding, there are policies on the Federal, State, and local levels that would enable BBBS to reach more kids. If governmental agencies gave their employees work release time to be mentors it would open up an enormous resource in potential volunteers. In Twin Cities, Minnesota, for instance, a partnership between the county government and the local Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliate does just this--and the County is enthusiastic about the possibility of making a difference in the lives of children BEFORE they enter the system. In Pennsylvania and throughout the nation, our affiliates would benefit greatly from a fast, effective, and low-cost system to screen potential mentors for child abuse incidents. The system in Pennsylvania, for instance, is cumbersome, slow, and low-tech--and because we will not match a volunteer until the Child Abuse Clearance comes back clean, we are slowed in our work because of this antiquated system. We dream of the day when potential volunteers can submit their information online and have their clearance sent to us electronically!

In Philadelphia, we have benefited from our relationship with the City and the School District. We would not be able to serve the thousands of children we do each year without this support. The challenges we face--a need for more African-American male mentors, unpredictable funding streams, increasing demands for documentation and overlap of databases/reporting from different funders--are challenges faced by non-profits and BBBS agencies everywhere. But, we need to balance new initiatives with the tried and true. And we need to focus on results--and on effective ways for collecting and sharing information about impact, results, and challenges.

Today, as this hearing is convened, we urge the continued commitment to mentoring as part of a multi-pronged approach to the challenges facing youth in our community. The positive impact of mentoring is more critical now than ever. We know mentoring works. BBBS mentoring is classified as a "Blueprint" program by the University of Colorado: as such, it is one of 11 model intervention programs (out of 600 programs reviewed) shown to be effective in reducing adolescent violent crime, aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse.

Go to www.bbbssepa.org or call 1-888-412-BIGS. As a recent article by Elmer Smith in the Philadelphia Daily News pointed out, being a mentor is a matter of taking the time to make a difference. And we encourage everyone in our community to stand up and provide the leadership that children so desperately need. On behalf of Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern PA, thank you for this opportunity to present testimony.

1. <http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/news/16119803.htm>
2. <http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/education/15792608.htm>