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Devereux Leads Resilience Initiatives as a National Model for Building Strong Social and Emotional Health in Children, says U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of HHS, Administration for Children and Families

Devereux Hosts Assistant Secretary George Sheldon, Educators, Early Childhood Professionals at Mental Health/Education-Focused Resilience Conference

May 31, Villanova, Pa.— Assessing and supporting children’s resilience in early childhood programs and education is a critical component to children’s development, laying a foundation for later competencies in managing stress and overcoming adversity throughout life, said Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, George H. Sheldon, while speaking Friday at the *Celebration of Resilience Conference* hosted by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC) in Villanova.

“We’ve so clearly seen the need to build resilience in children lately – through the traumas of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, through Sandy Hook,” said Sheldon. “Hope leads to resilience and resilience leads to success. If we can get to kids in the early years, we can make a difference. Devereux was the first organization to recognize the effect of trauma on kids, to make a commitment to the early assessment of resilience. Fundamentally, our work needs not just to be about child safety, but about child well-being. Have we given our children what they need to be socially and emotionally healthy, successful and well across their whole lifetime? This needs to be our focus,” he explained.

Sheldon joined many experts in the field of early childhood development, including Dr. Marilyn B. Benoit, Devereux’s Chief Clinical Officer, Cleo Rodriguez, Jr., Executive Director of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association, Mary Mackrain, M.Ed., Early Childhood Consultant, Michigan Department of Community Health, Tom Lottman, Deputy Executive Director, Children, Inc., and Dr. Grace Whitney, Director, Connecticut Head Start State Collaboration Office on a panel discussing the state of public policy in promoting children’s social and emotional health and development, and discussing the future of resilience initiatives and advocacy efforts.

Emmy Werner, American developmental psychologist, explained the concept of resilience in 1992 as the “successful adaptation in the individual who has been exposed to biological risk factors or stressful life events.” In effect, resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. As a psychological theory, resilience can be traced back to the early 1970s, but in recent years has moved from a deficits-based approach to one that is strengths-based, focusing on an individual’s strengths and resources that may facilitate adaptive behavior and positive outcomes.

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“We know that children’s good social and emotional health and strong resilience factors leads to more favorable long term academic and social outcomes,” said Dr. Benoit. “We are pleased to see the attention to resilience in children that is being paid in mental health and early intervention initiatives,” she said.

There is growing evidence that social and emotional deficits and a lack of resilience contribute not just to mental health problems in children, but also to academic difficulties. In fact, in 2010, a year-long study conducted by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children in conjunction with the Anchorage, Alaska School District found that among 1,000 students (kindergarten through eighth graders), children with the strongest social and emotional skills were more likely to perform well in math and reading.

Concerns about children’s social and emotional development in the early 1990s inspired Devereux to create the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC) in response to the societal trend of greater numbers of young children exhibiting challenging behaviors in childcare settings, as well as growing number of children entering residential treatment centers at a young age.

Since 1996, DCRC has worked with parents, educators and mental health professionals from across the country in developing behavioral assessments that can identify children at-risk of developing behavioral and academic problems because of their lack of social and emotional skills. The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) second edition was published in 2012. “Developing children’s strengths related to resilience at an early age maximizes their chances for succeeding in a world fraught with risks,” said Paul LeBuffe, Director of the DCRC.

LeBuffe says children are inundated with stressors every day, whether it is due to bullying in school, trauma due to natural disasters, community violence, or poverty and abuse. At-risk children are particularly vulnerable, for they often face multiple risk factors.

Cleo Rodriguez, Executive Director of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association, presented at today’s conference. Himself from a family of migrant farm workers, Rodriguez is now the leading advocate in the nation for migrant and seasonal farmworkers and particularly for the needs of their children. “We all have our journeys. We all come to crossroads,” said Rodriguez. “We all must make choices in life. The resilience we build in our childhood directly impacts our success in life,” he commented.

“Today’s event is a wonderful way to build collaboration with professionals across multiple disciplines that share the same vision and goal for the future of our nation’s children,” said Dr. Benoit. “If we shift the paradigm to focus on early intervention and healthy brain development, using strengths-based approaches and resilience, we will be able to design more holistic, effective and less costly interventions across all human services.”

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About Devereux

Devereux is a leading nonprofit behavioral healthcare organization that supports many of the most underserved and vulnerable members of our communities. Founded in 1912 by Helena Devereux, we operate a comprehensive national network of clinical, therapeutic, educational, and employment programs and services and public education and prevention initiatives that positively impact the lives of tens of thousands of individuals and families every year. We help empower children and adults with intellectual, emotional, developmental, and behavioral challenges to lead fulfilling and rewarding lives. Devereux.org

About the Devereux Center for Resilient Children

The Devereux Center for Resilient Children is a component of Devereux's Institute of Clinical and Professional Training and Research (ICPTR), which brings together clinical and educational expertise in order to study issues relating to the social and emotional health of children, particularly focusing on prevention, early intervention and resilience. ICPTR assists Devereux's own programs, as well as other community-based systems of care and organizations in providing high-quality, psychological and educational services to individuals with special needs. DCRC's resilience screening tools have helped more than four million American public school children to date.

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Left to right, Paul LeBuffe, Director of Devereux Center for Resilient Children; George H. Sheldon, Acting Assistant Secretary U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families; Dr. Marilyn Benoit, Devereux Chief Clinical Officer, Cleo Rodriguez, Executive Director of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association

