

Vermillion County Indiana – Commissioners’ Mentoring Program

- Description of the Program

The Commissioners’ Mentoring Program is an ambitious initiative to help educate high school students about local government and the duties of elected officials; to encourage civic engagement by students who are close to high school graduation; to persuade young citizens to complete their voter registrations; and to convince students to vote in future elections.

Three years ago, the Commissioners’ Mentoring Program was introduced in Vermillion County to help promote civic engagement, to heighten understanding of the duties and responsibilities required of elected officials, and to provide enlightenment regarding governmental functioning and processes. Program goals focus on education about and participation in our local government. Initial participation is through visiting the courthouse. Subsequent participation is via sharing the information and insights received with friends and fellow students. Additional involvement is anticipated through future contributions to local governmental functioning by means of casting ballots in elections, which will in turn guide our communities.

Each month a senior student is selected by local high school principals to participate in the program. Transportation to and from the County Courthouse is provided by the Vermillion County Sheriff. The Sheriff arrives outside the high school entrance in an official police vehicle at 7:45 a.m. The participant is transported from their high school to the courthouse where they are assigned honorary duties in a commissioners’ meeting. They gavel the meeting to order, lead the Pledge of Allegiance, take roll call, and at the end of the meeting, they gavel the official adjournment. After the commissioner’s meeting, the student is taken on a tour of the courthouse to visit with each elected office holder and to receive an explanation of the job duties and responsibilities of each official. These young adults are encouraged to register to vote, which many of them do while visiting the clerk’s office. They sit in on a court hearing and converse with the judge prior to returning school. At the end of the visit, when the student is preparing to enter the Sheriff’s vehicle, Commissioner Timothy Yocum has been heard to say, only half in jest, “This is the only time that I want to see you riding in a police car or standing before a judge.” He adds, “Unless you join the ranks of those who protect and serve.”

In an interview with Lacy Clifton of WTHI TV, Commissioner Yocum stressed “We’ve got future leaders here that we really need to find, and we need to harness them, and try to direct them and encourage them to move this county, state, and country forward.” He said he would love to see other counties adopt similar programs. The untapped resource of young vitality and potential must be cherished and nurtured. It’s a resource which we cannot afford to squander. An important element of the entire mentoring experience is to make government more realistic to the student and more applicable to their lives through a brief hands-on immersive interaction. The following is a link for the WTHI TV news story <https://www.wthitv.com/content/news/Students-immersed-in-county-government-468492473.html>

It takes a coordinated effort from many people to make the program run smoothly: high school principals and counselors recommend students for invitation; students participate and consequently miss out on some classes, much to their regret; the Sheriff arranges to be available to transport the student and offer positive and personalized attention to each individual; and all of the court house staff and other elected officials welcome the students to the center of our county government and share their knowledge.

The Indiana Association of County Commissioners (IACC) presented the “2017 Outstanding Team Effort for a Board of Commissioners” award to Vermillion County Commissioners Tim Wilson, Harry Crossley and Tim Yocum. The award was presented during the IACC’s 2017 Annual Conference. The award is in recognition of their outstanding team effort for introducing a High School Student Mentoring Program. Link from Indiana Association of County Commissioners (IACC) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xuql5XsM-0&feature=youtu.be>

The Commissioners’ Mentoring Program is designed to encourage students to learn about their government, instill a desire for civic engagement, and kindle a desire to be active and involved. Stress is placed on the importance of politics and the rights guaranteed to each member of the community to choose their elected

officials. The program allows students to get acquainted with the various roles within county government. This introduction to government meetings and politics may also produce a future leader in the county. The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow.

- Problem or Need for the Commissioners' Mentoring Program

The need to find a method of encouraging the young citizens of our county, and consequently, our nation, to educate themselves regarding governmental duties and functions has long been a concern for all civically responsible individuals.

Civic Responsibility and Higher Education, edited by Thomas Ehrlich, published by Oryx Press, 2000 states that "Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate."

The goal in instituting the Commissioners' Mentoring Program in Vermillion county is to help members of our newest adult members of the population to choose civic engagement. Additionally, the program is designed to help show local students why civic engagement is necessary for all United States citizens. Statistical evidence shows that an extremely low percentage of young adults voted in recent elections. We intend to motivate our local students to become more aware, to share the information, and to get out and vote!

- Cost of Program Vermillion County IN Commissioners Mentoring Program

Other than the cost of fuel for the Vermillion County Sheriff to provide transportation for the participating high school senior students from their schools to the court house, there is no monetary cost for the Commissioners' Mentoring Program.

The only non-monetary costs of the program are those of the time spent by the participating students and county officials. It is felt that the benefit to our community far outweighs the costs.

- The Results/Success of the Program

One of the goals of the Vermillion County Commissioners' Mentoring Program is to stimulate interest in civic engagement and to encourage high school seniors to register to vote.

Although no actual measurement instrument was put in place to demonstrate causation of outcomes of this program, there is strong anecdotal evidence showing a significant correlation between individual student participation and interest on the part of additional members of the student body in each high school. High school principals and school counselors have communicated increasing numbers of requests from members of the student body to be chosen to participate in the Commissioners' Mentoring Program.

Additionally, there is a larger percentage of registered voters in the local student population than prior to the introduction of the program. Several of the participants have expressed interest in working in local government after they graduate high school. A few of the students have stated they intend to become candidates for local government office in future elections.

- Worthiness of Award – Commissioners' Mentoring Program

The Commissioners' Mentoring Program helps to fill gaps in government education for local high school students. Providing an opportunity for student representatives to participate in and learn about their local government in an active role is designed to promote interest in an area of education that is often met with indifference by high school students. The dynamic interchange of information between the student

representatives and the local government officials is hoped to be a more memorable and engaging experience than reading about the governmental processes in books. Since it is an accepted belief that students will often express more interest in information obtained from their peers than in that offered others, it is hoped that students who have visited the courthouse will help to engage the interest of their fellow students. A primary goal of the program is to promote civic engagement.

For government actions and decisions to be considered fair and representative, it is important to ensure that the process of reaching the decisions is properly explained, that interchange of information is encouraged, and that government officials are available, approachable, and responsive. Having high school students visit the courthouse, not because there is a need for them to be there, but because they are on premises to learn the job duties and responsibilities of the various government officials can be a valuable tool in improving local government administration.

Measurable results of the Commissioners' Mentoring Program include increased percentage of high school students registered to vote; and increased interest in local governmental affairs in the student body as demonstrated by increasing numbers of requests to be selected for the Commissioners' Mentoring Program. Several queries from participants regarding the possibility of working in county government after graduation. Two individuals from the program have expressed an interest in becoming candidates for local government offices in future elections.

The Vermillion County Commissioners' Mentoring Program is the first mentoring program of its type in Indiana.