

“Where are they now?”

Penny Demo

In 1987 I accepted the position of Executive Assistant at Lewis County Opportunities, Inc., where I worked directly for Karl Reutling (former Executive Director) and was the clerical supervisor. Prior to working at LCOI, I lived in a “bubble” as I had no idea of the many hardships facing people in our community. For instance, the high number of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse cases as well as the lack of safe and affordable housing. LCOI was then and continues to be an exceptional not-for-profit organization that advocates for the well-being of Lewis County residents by offering programs designed to specifically meet their needs. During my tenure at LCOI, I had the privilege of working with so many incredible people who really cared about the well-being of individuals and families.

In 1992 I resigned from my position. I had two toddlers at home. Each day after dropping them off at the babysitters, I realized how much I wanted to be home with them. Money was tight but my decision to stay at home with my children was the best decision I ever made! However, I continued to volunteer at LCOI by coordinating what was then called the annual “Miles for Meals” Fundraiser Walk. My daughter Nicole and I would go door to door to local businesses seeking out donations for this very important fundraiser that helped raise monies for home delivered meals to the elderly. While fundraising one time, I locked my keys in my car at a restaurant in Glenfield. The owners of the restaurant gave us a monetary donation for the Miles for Meals Fundraiser and they also fed us while we waited for someone to unlock my car...we had so much fun, raised a lot of money, and met a lot of wonderful people.

1997 – 2002 I accepted a clerical part-time position at Lewis County Department of Social Services. While there I filled in at the Lewis County Board of Legislators on a temporary basis.

February 2000 I was appointed as the Lewis County Youth Bureau Assistant.

August 2002 to present, I accepted the position of Executive Assistant at Lewis County Department of Social Services. In this role, besides all the various duties associated with being an executive assistant, I am able to do what I love...helping our community by creating lasting partnerships with other agencies in an effort to help the homeless and economically vulnerable residents who reside in Lewis County.

Additionally from 2013 to present, I was appointed as the Director of the Lewis County Youth Bureau. The Youth Bureau membership reflects a balance of government, non-government, and up to 2 Student Representatives from each public school district in the county, who are

directly concerned with the well-being of youth. In their capacity on the board, they make tough decisions on funding quality youth programs in Lewis County.

2012-2013 I enrolled in the Lewis County Leadership Academy. Class members participated in discussions, site visits, role-playing exercises and analysis on issues of community concern, such as education, human services, and economic development. Each class member was tasked with identifying an unmet community need in Lewis County; formulate a plan to address the need; implement the plan; evaluate the results and prepare the project to be viewed by individuals that attended the 2012-2013 Leadership Academy Class Graduation in June of 2013. After much thought and guidance from others, I was advised to pursue a project that is meaningful and rewarding to me; expand on something I am already doing; think about "Here are my Strength's" What can I do that can be sustainable; this is how much time I can spend on this project; and here is what I can do. Keeping all of these things in mind and considering what I had learned from being in the class, specifically the importance of critical skills, including collaboration; visioning, consensus building, and creative problem solving in addressing the needs of Lewis County, my project was two-fold. To enhance my efforts at the Department of Social Services by focusing on the homeless population and youth programming and youth job opportunities. To be successful, I needed to partner and collaborate with other agencies to engage strategies to secure community and county government support.

Project Accomplishments: **"Homeless Summit"** In an effort to raise awareness of the homelessness in Lewis County, a "Working Group" was formed consisting of churches and human service and prevention agencies who hosted the "Homelessness Summit" on May 22, 2013. The goal of the summit was to create greater understanding of the hidden but real social crisis of homelessness in our county, as well as the ongoing lack of safe and affordable housing. With the expertise from federal and state representatives, as well as a panel of local leaders, we sought to inspire the community to take action in an effort to eliminate homelessness in Lewis County. The Keynote Speaker was Mr. Samuel E. Miller, Senior Management Analyst/Homeless Coordinator, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Jamie Forero, Albany Field Office Director and Mike Walling from the Mobile Vet Center/Department of Veterans Affairs. The Lewis County Youth Bureau asked Lewis County public school districts to join this mission by having art students paint pictures on the topic "What Does Homelessness Look Like to Me." The paintings were displayed at the Summit and needless to say, were very powerful and sparked compassion in all who viewed them. 105 people attended the Summit. ● In 2012 DSS provided intensive services for homeless families. The vast majority had deep roots in Lewis County, yet exhausted their family supports and so turned to DSS. To meet these needs, the Youth Bureau in partnership with DSS began the **"Homeless Bin Project."** Plastic bins were donated by Walmart and the Salvation Army provided us with a voucher to purchase personal hygiene, kitchen, and bathroom supplies to put in the bins. The bins were stored at DSS and were readily available for our homeless constituents and economically vulnerable consumers. This project continues today! Although the "Homeless Bin" Project continues to

be a success, there are other items that our constituent's need that government does not provide for, therefore, in December 2012 the **"Homeless Christmas Tree" Initiative** was launched. With the support of the Lewis County Youth Bureau, DSS, County Government, churches and our community, donations of new and slightly used items such as dishes, pots & pans; bedding, etc., were donated to help families "start over." A Christmas Tree was placed at DSS. Youth Bureau Student Representatives from Copenhagen and South Lewis approached their art teachers and asked that art classes make handmade ornaments for the tree. Each ornament placed on the tree symbolized that an item had been donated for this initiative. The goal was to blanket the tree with ornaments. For the past 3 years, the "Homeless Christmas Tree" has been located in the window of the Chamber of Commerce where it is more visible. This initiative was a success and continues to be a bigger success each year.

Seasonal Job Opportunities in Old Forge: In 2012 the Youth Bureau in partnership with the DSS Employment & Training Program recognized the unmet community need of summer youth employment opportunities. With the approval by County Government the Seasonal Bus Runs to Old Forge began. As youth seek employment in a competitive job market, it becomes even more important that the workforce system adequately prepare them to obtain good employment as part of their career pathway. At the time of the implementation of this program, the job market rate for youth in Lewis County had significantly decreased. With the implementation youth were able to secure employment in Old Forge at Water Safari. Many youth lack the basic experience employers require as it relates to attitude and behaviors necessary for them to succeed in a social work environment. This is why it is important that we continue to advocate for this seasonal bus run offered each year. The program provides the opportunity to help Lewis County youth in forming their lifelong work ethics. With the coordination, support and partnership between Lewis County Officials, Lewis County Department of Planning, the Lewis County Youth Bureau and Birnie Bus, the 5th year of this seasonal run was a success. Youth and Adults age 15 years and older were able to utilize public transportation to get back and forth to work at the cost of \$1.00 each way. This seasonal program lasts from June through Labor Day weekend each year. In 2016 a second bus was added due to demand and there are now several bus pick-up stops throughout the county and with each year the ridership increases. The Lewis County Department of Planning oversees the program and the Lewis County Youth Bureau assist with marketing and promoting the program.

Board positions I currently hold:

- NCPPC-North Country Prenatal/Perinatal Council-Board Member, Secretary, and Marketing/Fundraising Committee
- Friends of Lewis County Hospice-Board Member. Unfortunately my 6th year term as a Board Member and Secretary of FOLCH is slated to end in February 2017
- From 2015 to present I continue to be a voucher writer for the Salvation Army in the Lowville Service Unit.

- Recently I became a member of the YEAH! (Youth Empowerment and Health) program.
- Member of the Lewis County Health and Human Services Priorities Council since 2010. The mission of the council is to advance community health and human services through planning, evaluation, and the implementation of research based strategies in Lewis County.

The Leadership Academy helped me build confidence in myself...maybe a little too much! I have always been a “behinds the scenes person” rather than being “In the spot light.” However, in 2015 I decided to run for public office, a county elected position. I did this because I believed that being elected to a position, I could better help our community. I found out quickly that politics was definitely not for me. I found that politics, even in Lewis County was in my opinion, comparable to the recent Presidential Campaign.....not pleasant. However, although my experience was not a pleasant one, on the positive side, I met so many incredible people from all parts of our county, and who continue today in helping me with the work I do at DSS and with the Youth Bureau. I would definitely encourage people who want to run for an elected position to do so, but would also advise them to stay true to themselves.

With that said, since the election, I have a new goal, eventually, when I have “spare time”, I would like to create a uniformed packet of information that would be provided to each individual that seeks to run for an elected position. We live in a democracy, meaning that anyone who wants to run for an elected position should be able to do so. However to be successful they need the right tools including.....a uniformed packet of information.

In closing, these words written by Ralph Waldo Emerson make me realize that to better our community and be successful, we all have to do our part in work at forming lasting community relationships and partnerships. ***“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”***

All the community programs, initiatives, events that I am involved with, would have never been a success without the coordination of partnerships!