

## the MISSION

of the Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) is to enhance the effective services of Routt County agencies serving special needs, at-risk, and/or low income youth through financial and hands-on support.

Spring 2015



## Letter from the Director Mental Wellness

Mental wellness is not just the absence of a serious disease in our minds such as clinical depression, bipolar disorder, or other manifestations. Any definition of mental wellness must include an ability to function and go about our lives with some measure of success. A large part of what we do at CSFF is to support and nurture nonprofit organizations, schools, and other government entities working directly with low income, at-risk, and special needs youth in efforts to improve their mental wellness in an impactful, positive manner.

We were very pleased that Jessica Valand was invited to speak at the recent “Talk It Up” community event hosted by Routt To Work (formerly called the Routt County Bridges Initiative.) Jessica, the Employment and Training Manager for the Colorado Department of Human Services, spoke articulately and passionately about the importance of each and every person developing “executive functioning skills,” which are used every day to manage our lives and achieve our goals. Executive functioning skills begin to develop as soon as we are born. However, the trouble sets in when young children are raised in impoverished environments resulting in chronic and toxic stress. This results in the inability to develop executive functioning skills, along with other health and developmental concerns.

Routt to Work Coordinator Libby Foster has taken on a big job with big goals. And we think those goals can be reached! We couldn’t be more excited about this amazing collaborative, community program led by the Routt County Department of Human Services, Lift-Up and United Way. The main goal is to assist families and individuals in achieving their goals of self-sufficiency and stability, which reduces poverty and lessens the negative effects on their children. In a recent grant application Libby wrote:

“According to the American Physiological Association, research demonstrates that familial poverty negatively effects children’s physical and mental health and overall well-being. The consequences of these adversities are observed at home, in school, and in communities. Negative conditions that afflict our local youth living in poverty include substandard housing, inadequate child care, inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, and lack of health care.”

Hence, research shows that improving the lives and stability of adults has a large, positive impact on children’s mental wellness. Helping marginalized parents find jobs is therefore just one part of the equation. Assisting parents in gaining the skills needed to keep jobs and to create stability in all domains of their lives is a key component of the Routt to Work program. The success of this program depends on the collaboration and involvement of our entire Routt County community. Whether we are from the private sector, a government entity, or a nonprofit, we all need to work together to help improve the lives of marginalized families. We can role

model executive functioning skills as much as possible. We can help reduce stress in the work environment. We can change our response when employees fail. We can also focus compassionately on people's strengths while assisting them in building executive functioning skills. Within the dynamic framework of the Routt to Work program, we have a real opportunity of reducing generational poverty and increasing mental wellness for marginalized families. ■



**Sara Craig-Scheckman**  
*Executive Director*

## Mental Wellness

In today's fast-paced society, with instant access to information and connecting with people through various forms of technology, we rarely have a moment when we are not tuned in or turned off. Many people also experience stress in their daily lives from work, family, money and/or health issues, and so on. All of these factors, from devices to the stressors of daily living, are cluttering our minds and we are not giving ourselves the time out we need.

What some people do not realize is that the mind and body are inextricably linked, and stress can trigger physical reactions and illness. Just as we exercise and eat properly to take care of our physical health, we need to ensure that we are taking care of our mental fitness as well. Mental wellness has a variety of characteristics, but can essentially be described as a way of life geared toward optimal health of the body, mind, and spirit, of realizing that we can live healthier, happier and more successful lives. It can be achieved by having a positive attitude, being confident, possessing a sense of humor, taking initiative and remaining resilient, by having self-awareness and, more importantly, by being loving and kind to ourselves.

Gina Toothaker, of Mind Springs Health in Steamboat, says that there is a difference between mental health and mental wellness. She describes mental health as "how people think, behave and cope with life," which can be either good or bad. Mental health issues can be genetic or biological, so some people struggle with coping skills more than others. Mental wellness is part of a healthy life balance, having "the ability to bounce back from adversity and communicate feelings. It is about achieving realistic goals, practicing self-care, and being able to ask for help when things are difficult," says Toothaker.

There are several issues that can impede a person's mental wellness in our Routt County community. Toothaker believes the top factors include alcohol and drug use, health and age related difficulties, being able to make a living here where many people struggle to survive financially, and simultaneously experiencing the stigma of getting help from friends, family, or professional resources. Mind Springs Health offers groups and classes that teach coping skills, such as for chronic pain management, and their Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which helps clients learn mindfulness to reduce negative symptoms they are experiencing.

Mind Springs Health, through a grant from CSFF, is in its second year of providing therapy and case management services to at-risk students in the Steamboat Springs elementary schools. These are kids who have experienced trauma, have mental or behavioral issues, learning disabilities, or live with conflict in the home. By treating them

## What are Executive Functioning Skills?

Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.

### **Executive functioning skills include:**

- Impulse Control
- Organization
- Working Memory
- Time Management
- Task Initiation
- Flexibility
- Sustained Attention
- Stress Tolerance
- Planning/Prioritization



in their formative years, Toothaker says they are being taught skills “that will take them through the rest of their lives.” These are basic executive functioning skills which can be broken down into skills that relate to how kids think and skills that relate to how kids behave. Children accept change much easier when they are young; rather than wait until high school when teens face more serious problems such as involvement with the legal system or abusing substances, Mind Springs’ therapist is able to tackle these kids’ problems when they are more manageable. It is a form of preventative care, and these elementary school children are getting a big dose of mental wellness through executive functioning skill building. By teaching them new behaviors, this early intervention will have lasting results, making them more resilient and improving their overall health and well-being.

The very good news for all of us is that we can develop and enhance executive functioning skills at any age! The field of neuroplasticity has proven that the brain is capable of reorganizing and adapting itself by forming new neural connections. According to Tom Gangel, Regional Director of Mind Springs Health, by changing just one aspect of yourself, such as your thoughts, emotions, your body posture, or your attitude, you will automatically change or improve at least one other characteristic. For example, say that you get a flat tire on your way to work

and have to change the tire roadside. Instead of focusing on how you will be late to work and will arrive with dirty clothes, try looking on the bright side – at least it’s not raining. This may cause you to relax, if even a little bit, and your body will no longer be tense, and you may even be able to laugh at your situation. While this can be extremely difficult, looking for the good in a bad situation will improve your emotional outlook and increase your resiliency. Mental wellness also means having balance in your spiritual life. This does not necessarily mean going to church more often. Spirituality can be found in meditation, a connection to nature, or even in the compassion you show others. Mental wellness also means taking care of your physical self. Often times we spend so much time taking care of others that we forget to take care of ourselves. This can be as simple as spending time alone or listening to music, drinking tea or sitting in the sun.

## Tips for Mental Wellness

*(from Gina Toothaker at Mind Springs Health)*

- Get enough sleep
- Eat Well
- Exercise
- Volunteer
- Take time for yourself, family and friends
- Find healthy ways to manage stress
- Ask for help
- Deal with problems as they arise
- Have a good sense of humor
- Find something (a hobby) that you are passionate about
- Pets are great for mental well-being
- Have a positive attitude
- Have a good support system

We at CSFF are very proud of the impactful work that Mind Springs Health has taken on in our local

elementary schools, and we are humbled and honored to partner with them. We are committed to continuing our collaboration with Routt County agencies that are working to improve mental wellness in our community. It is our hope that local organizations and businesses learn more about the concept of wellness and begin to practice it for themselves and for their employees. We are certain that it will improve the quality of life for so many, and it is never too late to be mindful and achieve overall mental wellness. ■

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

## Happy YAP Anniversary!

In 2005, Michael and Sara Craig-Scheckman realized their dream of establishing a family foundation dedicated to improving the lives of youth in Routt County. After forming the Youth Advocacy Project, they began to not only distribute funding to local nonprofit organizations and schools, but also to nurture these agencies through grassroots, hands-on support. Throughout the last 10 years, CSFF has partnered with area agencies to support and enhance impactful youth programming. As Routt County continues to grow and evolve, we remain committed to strengthening our community by helping to develop and maintain resilient youth and families. We are excited to see where the next 10 years may lead!

## Vision

*The Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) envisions a strategic network of collaborative, sustainable youth serving agencies that builds resiliency in youth and guides them towards their optimal potential.*

## Staff



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### Calendar of Events

**June 4 - July 10**  
CSFF Office Closed

