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Kahlden serves youth with food insecurity

ANDREW CRITCHELOW The News-Enterprise
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Submitted Charis Kahlden serves as coordinator for Lakewood Elementary School's Family Resource Center.

From food insecurity to lack of quality internet access, COVID-19 has highlighted the struggles many rural families go through when putting their children through school.

Charis Kahlden knows of these struggles, and through her role as coordinator for Lakewood Elementary School's Family Resource Center, she has spent the last two decades identifying and helping families that face them.

"Our mission in the Family Resource Center is to remove the non-cognitive barriers to education," Kahlden said. "From day to day, we try to link families with community resources that will help reduce those barriers."

Kahlden has lived in the Stephensburg area since she was an elementary school student. A graduate of West Hardin High School, Kahlden earned her associates degree from Elizabethtown Community and Technical College and later commuted back and forth between Stephensburg and Bowling Green to earn a bachelors degree in social work from Western Kentucky University.

After earning her bachelors degree in 1997, Kahlden began to work with geriatric patients in the home health industry. She later went on to work for the now-defunct Nolin Family Focus in 1999, which served as a family resource center for five area elementary schools. She began working with the Lakewood Family Resource Center in 2003.

With Hardin County Schools now operating through non-traditional instruction amid COVID-19, Kahlden said one of the biggest issues rural families face is a lack of internet access. She said providing children with more meals during the day also has been a challenge for families.

To address these issues, Kahlden has helped link families with school WiFi hotspot areas and with meals through Hardin County Schools child nutrition services.

Kahlden said another major challenge students are going through is a lack of normalcy and structure.

“You have certain subjects during certain times and you have a structure set up,” she said. “You have someone who’s not your mom or your dad or your granddad or your grandmother teaching you. That has been an extreme challenge for our kids, I think.”

Kahlden said one of her favorite aspects of her job is organizing an annual summer enrichment camp through the resource center. She said the camp takes place each summer at the Glendale Campground.

“Many of these kids don’t go on vacation and they look forward to this day camp every year,” she said.

Kahlden is involved in a partnership between the Hardin County Cooperative Extension Service and the Communicare Regional Prevention Center called the Dinner Table Project. Through the project, videos are filmed at the extension office and posted on Lakewood Elementary School’s Facebook page each week that show families how to make certain meals and how to partake in fun family activities. The ingredients needed to prepare the meals will be available in advance for families in need, Kahlden said.

“The whole idea there is that families put away their devices and technology and sit down and have a meal and have conversations within that meal,” Kahlden said.

Lately, Kahlden has particularly been focused on providing holiday assistance for area students. She said she has been working with area individuals and churches to secure donations for the Salvation Army Angel Tree program, which provides Christmas gifts for children in need.

“Every school in Hardin County has students who are on that tree,” she said.

Each year, Kahlden’s holiday efforts are benefited by the White Mills community’s annual bridge lighting and chili supper event. The 2020 event took place Sunday and all proceeds went toward Lakewood Elementary School’s Family Resource Center.

In addition to receiving funding from the bridge lighting and chili supper, Kahlden also volunteers for the event each year.

“I would be participating in it even if it didn’t benefit the center and the Lakewood families because I think it just has a wonderful hometown feel,” she said.

Throughout her 21 years of service, Kahlden said she always has felt at home serving the community in which she was raised. She said seeing the children she has served grow up, overcome their early struggles and build fulfilling lives has been her greatest reward.

“I’m now seeing the students I worked with when they were three or four years old become parents themselves,” she said.

Andrew Critchelow can be reached at 270-505-1746 or acritchelow@thenewsenterprise.com.