

Staying in touch

New jail outreach keeps incarcerated parents connected to children

BENZIE COUNTY — A new jail outreach program at the Benzie County Jail is helping keep incarcerated parents in touch with their children using children's books and recordings.

Remain in Touch, a nonprofit organization, started operating in Benzie County in April. Connie Eisenhart, president of Remain in Touch, said the program reaches out to inmates who are either parents or grandparents of children zero to 12 years-of-age. The inmate gets to chose a new children's book they think will be appropriate for their children or grandchildren, and read it out loud to a program facilitator. The program facilitator records the reading and burns the recording to a compact disc, which is then sent to the children, along with a copy of the book being read.

"Each child in the inmate's family gets a copy of the CD and the book," said Connie Eisenhart, president of Remain in Touch.

She said inmates can chose from about 200 different books that range from books for infants to about a sixth grade reading level.

"On our first day, we had 12 inmate record and 21 children got books," Eisenhart said. "it has been really well received."

Remain in Touch facilitators go into the jail every other week.

Eisenhart said the program helps to keeps family unit intact while the parent is incarcerated.

"The children can listen to the recording and read along any time they want; it keeps the family connected," Eisenhart said. "It has been show inmates that keep a family connection and involved in parental role are much less likely to reoffend. It can also help children with emotional issues that can arise when a parent is incarcerated."

Dan Smith, administrator jail administrator, agreed the program was a benefit to the inmates and their family.

"I've gotten nothing but positive feedback from the inmates and their family members," Smith said. "There is definitely a benefit when the parent and child can keep a connection. This program is a way to provide that connection that wouldn't normally be there. I think it's a great program."

Eisenhart said she started the Remain in Touch program in Leelanau County last year, and several organizations from Benzie County reached out to her.

"I was invited to come speak by the head start coordinator for the Benzie Early Childhood Workgroup 0 to 6," She said. "The decisions to make Benzie County a second site came pretty quickly after that."

She said the early childhood workgroup and Benzie Cares for Kids quickly came up with the resources necessary to start the program, raising money, finding volunteers and getting permission from the Benzie County Sheriff's Office and the jail.

"Those two groups came up with \$2,500 in almost 10 days time," Eisenhart said. "The Benzie Early Childhood Workgroup bought the books and Benzie Cares for Kids bought recorders, postage for sending the recordings and take care of other things the facilitators need."

She also said it wouldn't have been possible to bring the program to Benzie without the outpouring of support.

"No one person in responsible for bringing this to benzie, but a cadre of people," Eisenhart said. "Without facilitators, without the support of the Benzie Early Childhood Workgroup and Benzie Cares for Kids and without the permission of the jail, we couldn't have done it."

For more information on Remain in Touch, visit www.remainintouch.org.