



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Providing children, adults, and families an effective support system to assist in obtaining self-sufficiency and a safe, stable, healthy living environment



INSIDE SNEAK PEEK:

- Brittany Edwards Named Social Worker of the Year
- Child Support Awareness Month
- The Reunification House
- Public Assistance Collaborates with the Haven
- Educator Breakfast is OMJPC Success

SOCIAL WORKER BRITTANY EDWARDS IS HONORED

Brittany Edwards, a Portage County Job and Family Services social worker, was named Ohio's "2023 Mary Ellen Social Worker of the Year" by the Ohio CASA/GAL Association at its 28th Annual Celebrate Kids! Conference September 21, 2023. This is an honor not given to many. In fact, only one social worker in Ohio is given this recognition for exceptional work and their collaboration with a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) program annually.



While this award already holds much significance on its own standing, a few factors make this year's honor even more remarkable. First, this award has never been given to someone from Portage County. Second, and perhaps most noteworthy is about Brittany herself: Brittany was nominated and given this award above all other social workers in Ohio after only being a social worker for a little more than a year. That statement alone resounds of her extraordinary dedication to her work and the families of Portage County.

"Brittany is a worker who cares so much about the kids. She is a big asset to our agency because of her heart for her work and her families," said Scott Lazzara, Brittany's supervisor at PCJFS. When asked how she felt about being honored with this year's award, Brittany said she was "shocked." "It is surreal to be named the Mary Ellen Social Worker of the Year for Ohio. I feel incredibly blessed and humbled to have been chosen," said Brittany.

Brittany Edwards continued

Brittany worked hard to overcome a tumultuous background and arrive at a place of helping others. She witnessed many in her life who were in situations where they could have used a support system or advocate. Brittany knew from these life experiences that she wanted to be a help like this for others. She put in the work over many years to get to this current place in her career and hasn't stopped. She understands that having the right caseworker is vital. It can make all the difference in a child's life. She approaches every one of her cases that way... and it shows. Spending just a few moments chatting with Brittany about her heart for her work is all it takes to be inspired.



Brittany Edwards surrounded by coworkers & supporters from Portage County

In addition to her dedication to helping children in need, part of the nomination and distinction of Brittany's Social Worker of the Year Award also involved her excellent communication and collaboration with the Portage County CASA program. Court staff and CASA volunteers say that many children's lives have been improved thanks to Brittany's involvement. The award ceremony was part of a three-day conference in Columbus, where over 600 child welfare advocates from across Ohio gathered for training and discussions.

CHILD SUPPORT AWARENESS MONTH

CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AGENCY

In August 2023, Portage County, along with the State of Ohio, recognized Child Support Awareness Month. The Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA) used this month to increase awareness of the child support program and its achievements and to recognize its partners in child support.

Some of the CSAM activities included a social media awareness campaign and "Wear Green Day." Additionally, appreciation snack baskets, tote bags, and certificates were presented to all Portage County CSEA staff and community partners in the Portage County Domestic Relations



PCJFS staff showing CSAM support for Wear Green Day on August 2

Court, Clerk of Courts, and Prosecutor's Office for recognition of support to the program. Child Support Awareness tote bags were also handed out this year at the Portage County Randolph Fair.

The Child Support Enforcement Agency aids in the healthy development of children across Portage County by assuring children receive the financial support of both parents. For questions, please visit the website [here](#), or call the office at (330) 297-3791.

Child Support Awareness Month Statistics:

Did you know...

- 1 out of 3 children are involved in Ohio’s Child Support Program;
- 4 out of 10 children are born to unmarried parents;
- Your CSEA agent can assist you with a child support order free of charge once paternity is established;
- 35,728 support orders were established in FFY22;
- 48,988 paternities were established in FFY22; AND
- 879,091 children are served statewide in Ohio’s Child Support Program ?



**Information provided by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.*

COMMUNITY PARTNER CORNER:

REUNIFICATION HOUSE



What is the Reunification House?

STRUCTURE

SUPPORT

A CHANCE FOR SUCCESS

PARTNERSHIP

SOBER LIVING

ENCOURAGEMENT

ACCOUNTABILITY

HARD WORK

HOPE

Portage County Job & Family Services and Family & Community Services, Inc., are partnering to provide Portage County with a sober living housing opportunity for parents who have lost custody of their children due to their struggles with addiction.

PCJFS Child and Adult Protective Services Caseworker Janie Rodkey and Supervisor Dawn Wyckoff-McDonald maintain close relationships with both the clients they refer to the Reunification House and to Reunification House Case Manager Alyssa. Janie and Dawn attribute much of the success of the clients who complete the one-year sober living program to the accountability and support of the staff at the Reunification House. With a smile on her face, Janie described a recent story of a previously resistant and incarcerated mother who has obtained sobriety and reunified with her children. “The clients we refer to the Reunification House would not be as successful without the encouragement, support, and accountability they receive from the house manager.” Dawn echoed these accolades for the Reunification House. “I can’t think of a better program for parents starting out on their recovery journey,” she said.

A FULFILLING COLLABORATION

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The Portage County Job and Family Services Public Assistance division recently embarked on an exciting opportunity to collaborate with the Haven of Portage County. This new collaboration between Public Assistance and the Haven is an effort to better serve the Haven's residents. There are services and benefits the residents may qualify for, and this initiative provides an opportunity for in-person assistance twice per month.

A PCJFS Public Assistance staff member is available on-site to answer questions, give direction, help with applications, and complete interviews. This can provide a more personal, convenient, and timely experience with public assistance.

The Haven of Portage County is a rescue mission and warming center where the vulnerable can find not only a meal and a bed, but also hope. The Haven addresses each state of homelessness and provides a holistic healing method through the power of the gospel. In addition to shelter and food, it provides life and job training, as well as support to build needed skills to succeed in life.

Erica Smith, an Eligibility Specialist with PCJFS PA was excited to volunteer for this opportunity and kicked off this project in early September. "I feel so thankful to be working with the people at the Haven," said Erica. "My first day there was so awesome. I was able to help eight to ten people, referring them to programs and doing intakes." Erica went on to explain that many of the residents at the Haven have nowhere to go and feel stuck or confused about their eligibility options. "There is a joy and fulfillment in being able to help people move forward - helping them with programs to get them where they need to go. Also, the people I have worked with are so friendly and respectful. They are so gracious."

Erica feels this new collaboration is beneficial not only for the residents of the shelter, but also for the agency as a whole. "We are helping people who are not currently able to help themselves," continues Erica. "When we see clients face-to-face and help them understand the programs and benefits that can help them reach their goals, this also helps us as an agency to reach our goals." Erica looks forward to continuing her work at the Haven and hopes other PCJFS staff will see these types of collaborations as incredible opportunities truly make a difference in our community.

To learn more about the work of the Haven of Portage County, visit www.portagehaven.org.



*Erica Smith, PCJFS Eligibility Specialist,
at the Haven of Portage County*

EDUCATOR BREAKFAST

OHIO MEANS JOBS PORTAGE COUNTY

The OhioMeansJobs Portage County (OMJPC) Educator Breakfast was held on September 20, 2023, at UH Portage Medical Center. The purpose of this community event was to provide an opportunity for educators to learn more about the free programs and services that OMJPC offers local students to help them prepare for life after graduation. This year's OMJPC Educator Breakfast event saw great success, reaching fifty-five people in attendance and representing eleven different school districts.

To kick off the event, Nicole Little, a case manager from OMJPC spoke about some of the services OMJPC has available for students. Such programs and services like CCMEP and OMJ WORKS, along with the newly purchased TRANSFER VR, which seeks to complement career exploration and training, combine to give students many options as they prepare for their futures after high school.

As the event continued, a panel of employers from Kent displays, Vogelsang, MAC Portage DD and Hattie Larlham spoke about their internship opportunities for students and what they look for in applicants who are entering the workforce. A representative from the Educational Service Center of the Western Reserve discussed additional pathways to graduation, and United States Army Sergeant First Class José Aquado discussed military options available for students. Additionally on site to speak about student services was a representative from Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities.

Following the event, Workforce Administrator for OMJPC Mandy Minnick received several notes of appreciation from participants. Educators around the county seemed to genuinely appreciate the effort, planning and content of the Educator Breakfast. One educator from Aurora Schools commented, "I can tell the passion that you have for what you do, and it is inspiring! I learned so much at this event and have many ideas for connections and enhancing the work that I do for students at Aurora High School."

Minnick is thankful for this opportunity to share information about valuable OMJPC services with the education community of Portage County.





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