

Dennis Vanderpool – AYS

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

A young woman is going through nurses' training. As she prepares for a career helping others, it is cause to reflect on a time when she needed help herself. She is "giving back" for the care she received as a child. This is one of the success stories of the foster care provided across Kansas by Associated Youth Services. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dennis Vanderpool is CEO of Associated Youth Services, called AYS for short. Dennis grew up in Kansas City and went to K-State. He had a long career in social services, working in various mental health centers and helping start drug and alcohol treatment programs. In 1998, he became CEO of Associated Youth Services back in Kansas City.

This organization began back in 1912 as the Mennonite Children's Home, an orphanage in the Argentine district of Kansas City, Kansas. The orphanage was originally created to care for orphans from the great flu epidemic of the early 1900s, but the needs have grown and changed through the years.

In 1972, the Mennonite Church closed the orphanage but helped to establish Argentine Youth Services. AYS is led by a non-denominational volunteer board. As the organization's client base grew and shifted, AYS changed its name to Associated Youth Services in 1987. In 2006, AYS moved its headquarters to downtown Kansas City, Kansas so as to be closer to its core clientele.

AYS also opened offices across the state to serve more families and youth. The organization now has offices in Garden City and Hutchinson.

"We serve disadvantaged young people through a variety of programs," Dennis Vanderpool said. These include drug and alcohol treatment, GED preparation, community health, residential care, and foster care. The residential center for temporary housing is located in Kansas City.

"Foster care is the program which provides safe homes for kids across the state," Dennis said. "Our kids have so many challenges. They may come from extreme poverty or have been subject to physical or emotional abuse or neglect. Many do not have the things which we take for granted, such as having caring adults, access to health care, or a positive environment in which to grow up. We try to fill in the gaps," he said.

When Dennis became CEO of Associated Youth Services in 1998, the organization was serving three- to four-hundred kids each year. Today, among all its programs, AYS is serving some four- to five-thousand kids each year.

The foster homes are located across the state, in urban cities and rural communities as small as the town of Holyrood, population 447 people. Now, that's rural.

"Our foster families do incredible things," Dennis said. "They take these kids who have all these challenges and raise them as their own."

One long-time foster family invites every single one of their former foster children to their place for Thanksgiving. "They may have 30 or 40 kids at their place on Thanksgiving Day," Dennis said. Better order the turkey by the truckload.

"It is so gratifying when kids come back to us and share how successful they have become," Dennis said.

A person must meet state guidelines and go through training to qualify as a foster parent. AYS provides extensive training for prospective foster families, as well as opportunities for peer support.

“It helps to have a group of foster families located close together so they can help each other, with respite care or other needs,” Dennis said. Once they become foster parents, the families have access to case managers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We need more foster families,” Dennis said. “We have lots more referrals than we can place. Parents who are good communicators, who can build self-esteem in youth, assure health and safety, manage youth behaviors and can work in partnership with agencies should contact us.” For more information, go to www.aysusa.org.

A young woman is going through nursing care, preparing to “give back” to society for the care she received in a foster home through Associated Youth Services. We salute Dennis Vanderpool and all those affiliated with AYS for literally making a difference in the lives of young people.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.