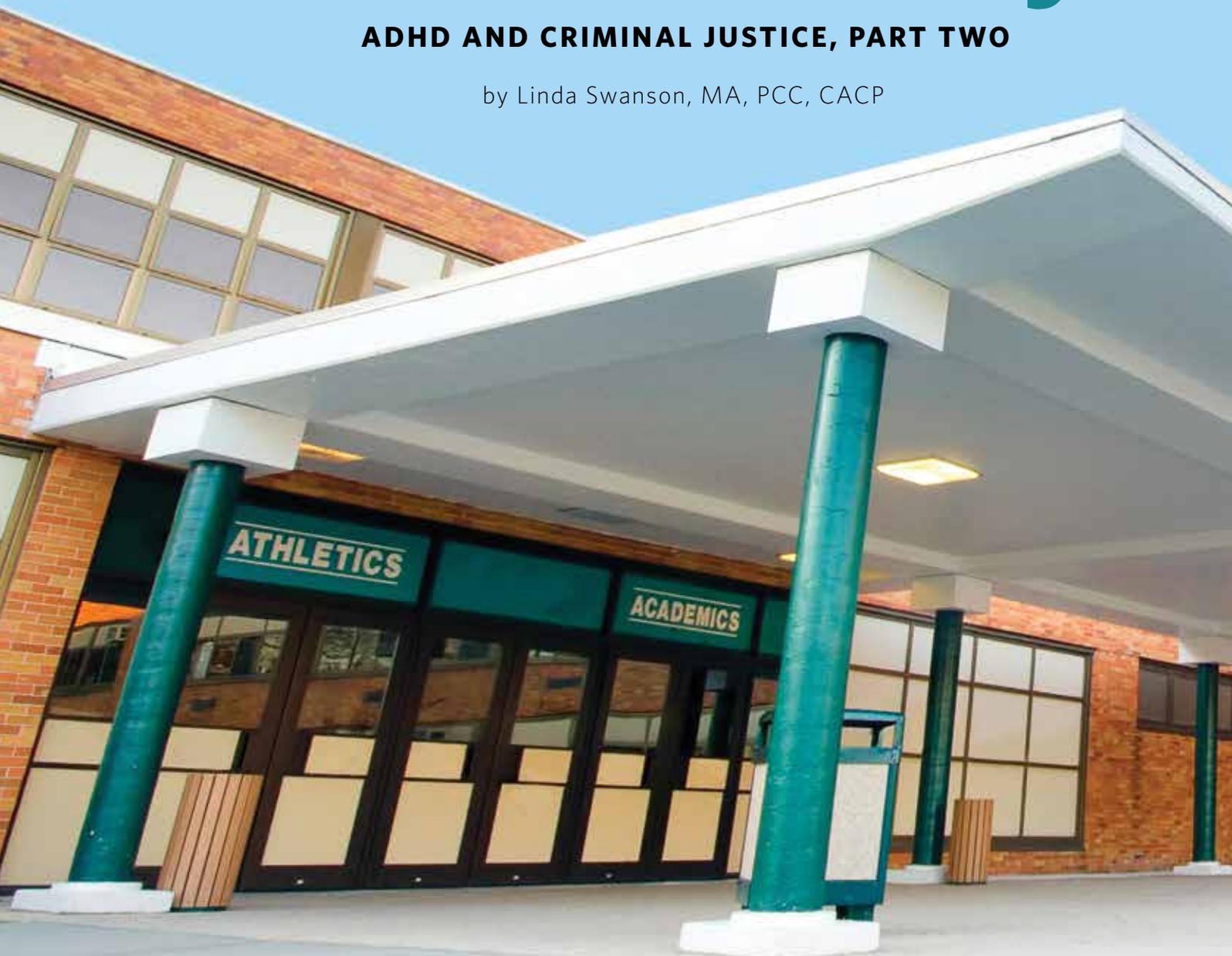


RAISING ADHD Awareness IN THE Local Community

ADHD AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE, PART TWO

by Linda Swanson, MA, PCC, CACP

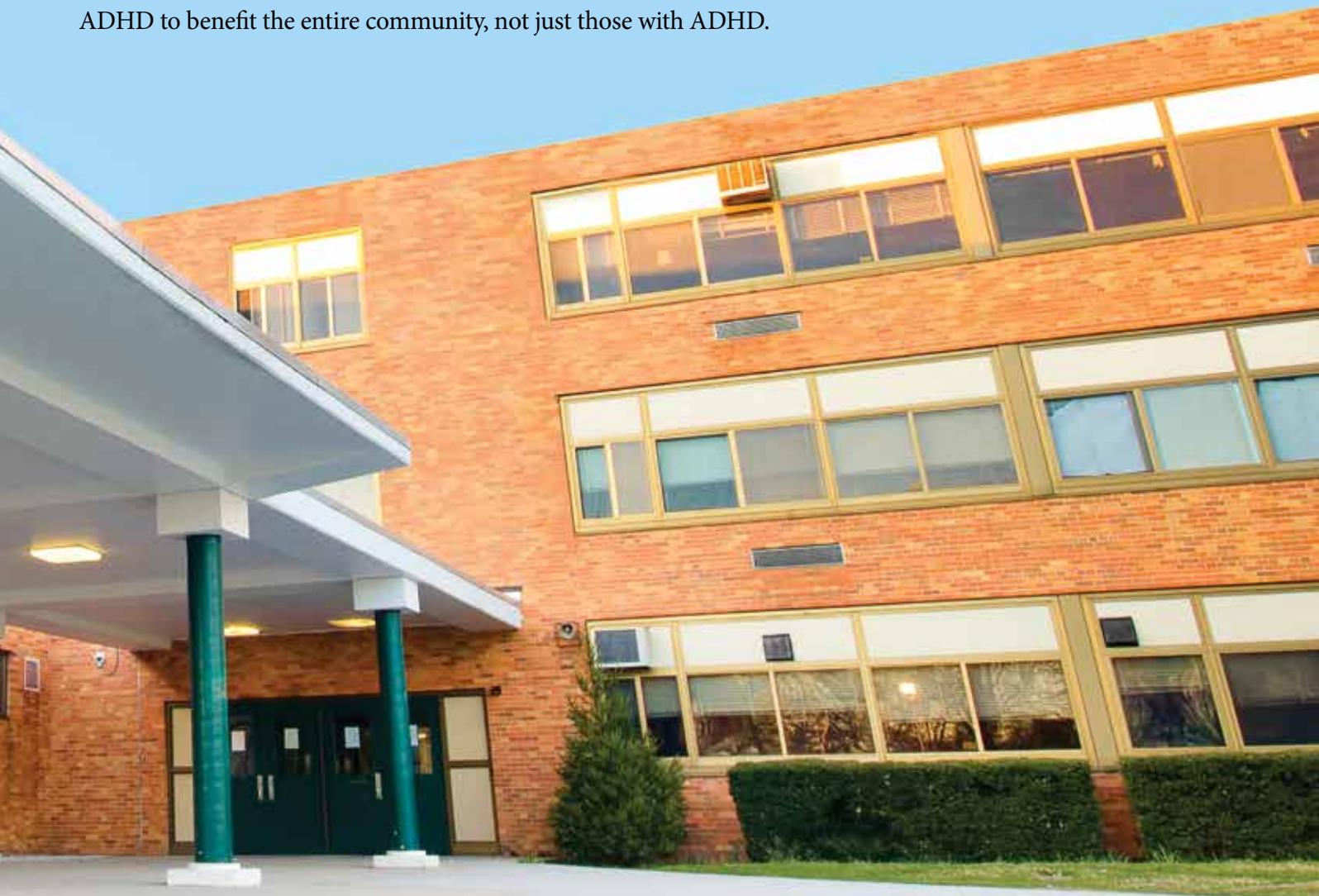


EVERY OCTOBER we observe International ADHD Awareness Month. Those of us in the worldwide ADHD community have the opportunity, even responsibility, to raise awareness about ADHD during the other eleven months of the year as well.

The people we encounter in our communities impact our lives in many ways. Those impacts are much more likely to be positive if there is a common understanding of neurodiversity in general and ADHD in particular.

Part two of this series focuses on ways to bring education about ADHD to the people involved in the school-to-prison pipeline described in part one. Fewer individuals would find themselves in that pipeline if their teachers and school disciplinarians understood more about ADHD. And if more people in the criminal justice system were educated about how someone with ADHD might respond when under stress, the result could be a reduction in the number of people charged with crimes, as well as a reduction in the recidivism rate. This is especially true given that, according to many sources, as many as 50 percent of the citizens currently involved in the justice system have ADHD.

What can each of us do to help? It turns out, quite a lot! This article challenges us to step up to the opportunity to educate one or two or more people in our communities each year about ADHD to benefit the entire community, not just those with ADHD.



What we have done in our local schools

My husband, Neil, and I are ADHD coaches in a small town in rural Fauquier County, Virginia, just on the outskirts of what is considered the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. We have become aware of a number of ways people in our local and wider community are responding more and more compassionately to ADHD and neurodiversity. We are doing our best to contribute to that effort and to encourage more movement in that direction.

We know that teachers and school resource officers who regard the actions of a child with ADHD as bad behavior are likely to respond with punishment rather than with understanding and support. There are alternatives to punishment that are not as likely to start a child down the pipeline. Are your teachers aware of those alternatives?

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We have learned that one program our school system uses is called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS; learn more at www.fcps1.org/Page/998). This program is part of a Virginia Department of Education state project to provide supports that address students' needs by offering "a rich menu of positive behavioral support options." Is your school system using PBIS or some other similar option to punishment?

School systems welcome speakers for their various meetings and training programs. Neil and I have worked with and given presentations about ADHD to our school system's Parent Resource Center, as well as to school administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers to be sure they are aware of the needs of students with ADHD.

What civic committees might welcome your input as an advocate for individuals with ADHD? Neil is in his third year serving as a member of the county school board's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), which is tasked with keeping the school board advised of needs in the area of special education. Through this work he is constantly made aware of ways the school system is falling short, and he is doing what he can to help. He is known for his advocacy for ADHD, so his presence assures that ADHD is not overlooked in that committee. In the spring, we are scheduled to give a presentation to SEAC about ADHD.



The Fauquier County Mental Health Association has done a fabulous job of educating hundreds of citizens (including a large number of the public school teachers) in mental health first aid and youth mental health first aid. Neil and I have taken both of those two-day courses, and they are wonderful—but there is only a tiny mention of ADHD. We have provided the instructors with more information and understand that they are sharing it in their classes.

If you are interested in bringing one of the mental health first aid courses to your area, we recently learned of a new group to teach. Just last week I heard a podcast from the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice that described a program in Connecticut that teaches youth mental health first aid to students so that they will have the tools they need to assist their peers in distress. That's a great model—don't young people much more readily turn to other young people than to adults? Every bit of new awareness helps.

Outreach to law enforcement and the justice system

Have you ever been stopped for a traffic violation, felt a rush of righteous indignation, and blurted an inadvisable comment to the officer? If the officer was aware of characteristic behaviors of folks with ADHD, especially in stressful situations, she or he might be more understanding, so long as there was no risk to safety. A pause to reflect on what might be going on for the driver provides



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the officer with an opportunity to choose to head down a radically different path from arrest—one that can lead to a positive future for the driver and the community.

Fortunately, some individuals in the criminal justice system have a personal understanding of ADHD, as did a law enforcement official with whom we recently spoke. A member of his family has ADHD, so he was inclined to be more understanding. Not everyone has that personal perspective, however. Where understanding is lacking, the individuals need to be educated. That's where we all have an opportunity to act and contribute.



We have given presentations to parole boards, to members of the sheriff's department, to members of a citizen's panel (to which we belong) that addresses the needs of juveniles involved in the justice system. With whom might you meet in your community?

Our local chapter of CHADD (NOVA/DC) presents a series of monthly lectures. In May, Neil and I will be presenting one of those lectures along with two leaders from two local county school systems. One woman will discuss how the PBIS system is working in her county. The other speaker will be a woman who was instrumental in creating a restorative justice program in her county of well over a million residents with a huge school system. Has restorative justice been introduced to your school system or community?



Neil and I have been looking further afield to a program for teaching pro-social skills, cognitive skills, and values to youth and adults that was developed several decades ago in Canada. We hope to be trained in this program and to bring it to our county. Some nonprofits have already expressed interest.

The program is called R&R—Reasoning and Rehabilitation—and it has a primary focus on helping people who are involved in or likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. R&R has been taught to over 70,000 offenders in twenty countries and a few US states.

In 2005, a specialized version of the training was developed specifically for individuals with ADHD. Called R&R2 ADHD, this fifteen-session program, usually delivered once a week, has been shown to greatly reduce recidivism.

Most restorative justice programs rely in part on volunteers. Some training is usually required, but if you already know about ADHD you will have good background understanding of the issues and can share your understanding with others in the program.

The schools in nearby Fairfax County, Virginia, have a strong restorative justice program. It emphasizes accountability, character development, and school and community safety. It is a formal, multi-step process that teaches social and emotional skills, fosters empathy, and makes clear the many ways one person's actions have an impact on many others.

Fairfax County also has an alternative accountability program that offers young people in trouble a voluntary restorative justice program. Through a series of conferences, the young person who is accused of a crime meets with those who were harmed by his actions. They engage in a circle process during which the victim expresses how she has been harmed, the accused is asked to share what he was thinking at the time, the community reports the wider impact, and the parties come to a mutual agreement about how the harm can be repaired. Some of these cases never go to court if they are successfully resolved through the restorative justice process.

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Reach out to thought leaders and decisionmakers

These are just a few examples of ways you can get involved in raising the level of awareness of ADHD among thought leaders and others in your communities. The diagram on page 31 shows the agencies, schools, and others that we have targeted in our immediate area. We have not yet approached them all by any means, and the chart surely does not include everyone who could benefit from understanding ADHD better, but it's a start.

If you would like to receive a blank version of this chart so you can fill in the relevant agencies and individuals in your community, contact me at linda@freetobecoaching.com and I'd be happy to send you a PDF. It can serve as a mind map of the many opportunities you have to raise ADHD awareness.

We have found that most people are eager to help. Just as Dr. Ross Greene says about kids: "If they could do better, they would do better," we might say, "If they (the public, particularly the decisionmakers) had the knowledge and understanding to support those of us with ADHD and our children, there's a pretty good chance they would respond better."

Consider taking a step outside your comfort zone for ADHD awareness. That's what we've been doing, and it's enormously rewarding. The sense of community and common purpose you will find is its own reward. 📍

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