



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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For immediate release

April 2, 2012

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Outstanding advocates for children recognized

Governor's Awards presented during Child Abuse Prevention Month

Richmond, Va. — Governor Bob McDonnell, along with the Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (GAB), has announced winners of this year's awards for individuals committed to improving the lives of children.

“Child abuse prevention is one of our high priorities at the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). VDSS, parents, family members and the community at large have a responsibility to make this happen.” said VDSS Commissioner Martin D. Brown. “Without individuals like these, we would not be able to reach as many children as we do. I thank them for their daily commitment to advocating for and protecting the Commonwealth's youngest and most vulnerable citizens.”

The GAB Awards recognize Virginians who have exhibited a strong commitment to advocacy, protection, prevention, treatment and assistance.

In addition, each year the Dr. Shaw Award is given to distinguished child protective services professionals for outstanding contributions to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. This award was established in 1992 in honor of Anthony Shaw, M.D, who was a leader in the development and passage of the 1975 Virginia Child Abuse and Neglect Act, which established Virginia's system of child protective services.

Awards were presented at this year's Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month Conference in Richmond on April 2.

The conference is sponsored by the [Virginia Department of Social Services](#) and [Prevent Child Abuse Virginia](#) and co-sponsored by the Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, the [Family and Children's Trust Fund](#), and the Virginia Coalition for Child Abuse Prevention. April is recognized as [Child Abuse Prevention Month in Virginia](#) and around the country.

This year's winners of the GAB Awards are:

Susan Curtis, M. Ed., of Leesburg, Virginia

Susan Curtis has worked in the field of domestic and sexual violence for 23 years and has been a pioneer in developing services for child victims of domestic violence. In 1994, she became the Executive Director of *Loudoun Citizens for Social Justice, Inc. – Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter (LAWS)* and utilized her passion for children to expand services to assist child victims of abuse. She has written numerous grants to increase funding for programs offered to children and families affected by domestic violence, sexual and physical abuse. Susan Curtis has provided exemplary work in the field of child abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault reaching hundreds of children and families.

Karen Polonko, PhD, of Norfolk, Virginia

Karen Polonko, PhD has brought a passion and dedication to her work for 28 years by developing community awareness programs, curriculum on child abuse and children's rights, authoring numerous publications, and inspiring and educating her students about the prevalence and dynamics of child abuse and neglect. Dr. Polonko has co-produced a Child Abuse Prevention series bringing nationally recognized speakers who have increased knowledge and understanding about child abuse for Old Dominion University (ODU) students, faculty and the greater community. Dr. Polonko advocates for an end to all forms of child maltreatment and annually conducts a "Candlelight Vigil" in memory of all children in Virginia who have suffered and died as a result of abuse.

Reverend Thurman O. Echols, Jr., of Axton, Virginia

Reverend Echols served on the Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (GAB) from 2004 until 2011 and as Chair from 2008 until 2011. Under his leadership, the GAB had an increase in commitment to prevention activities and supported the expansion of the Child Abuse Prevention Conference. The GAB also took an active role promoting prevention programs such as Stewards of Children, Darkness to Light, prevention of Abusive Head Trauma and Fatherhood initiative programs. In addition to being a member and chair of the GAB, Reverend Echols served on numerous service boards in the Henry-Martinsville-Pittsylvania area such as United Way, Citizens Against Family Violence, Community Action, Salvation Army, and on the Axton Life Saving Crew. Reverend Echols lives by his statement that "The great reward for serving others is the satisfaction found in your own heart. Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy in the world."

Ian Danielsen, of Richmond, Virginia

As the *Child Advocacy Center (CAC)* coordinator, Ian Danielsen's efforts have ensured that highly trained forensic interviewers are available to the children in Richmond and surrounding areas to assist them through some of the most difficult experiences of their young lives. Mr. Danielsen also facilitates collaborative child abuse investigations and child-centered services for the four Multidisciplinary Teams (MDT) in the Greater Richmond Area. He also devotes his time to provide mental health counseling to children and adults suffering trauma related to physical and /or sexual abuse. He represents the CAC by educating the community at large about the best practices of the CAC, MDT and National Children's Alliance (NCA). Mr. Danielsen has engaged and collaborated with Child Protective Services, local police, Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center's Child Protection Team, *Greater Richmond Stop Child Abuse Now (SCAN)*, local mental health providers, and the Commonwealth's Attorneys. As a result of his efforts, victims of severe child abuse in the Greater Richmond Area have a high

level of case management, an improved referral process, a coordinated response for all cases of child abuse and access to a psychologically and physically safe place for children to receive services.

Dr. Michelle Clayton, M.D. MPH, FAAP, of Norfolk, Virginia

Dr. Michelle Clayton joined the Child Abuse Program at *Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters (CHKD)* in 2004 and has brought a remarkable combination of compassion and expertise to make Virginia a safer place for children. Recently in a month's time, Dr. Clayton spoke to 150 professionals at a conference on abusive head trauma, provided training to a gathering of regional child abuse investigators, gave emergency service workers advice on how to assess and provide care to child abuse and trauma victims and trained 65 guardians ad litem from across Virginia on mental and medical health aspects of child abuse. Dr. Clayton is a sought after national speaker on child abuse and neglect. She has provided expert testimony in approximately 100 child abuse and neglect cases in the region's courts. Dr. Clayton has devoted her life's work to improve the investigation and prosecution of child abuse in Virginia and to help transform hundreds of child abuse and neglect victims into survivors.

This year's winners of the **Dr. Anthony Shaw Award** are:

Betty Jo Zarris, MSW, of Richmond, Virginia

Betty Jo Zarris has worked at all levels in the social services system as a direct service worker, an educator, a trainer, a supervisor and as an administrator. She has worked for small rural agencies as well as for large metro agencies. Her 40 year career spans all of child welfare services, however; her passion, commitment and most noteworthy contributions have been to the Child Protective Services (CPS) program. Her most recent programmatic contributions have included the implementation of Structured Decision Making, Differential Response, establishing the Prevention Program and the execution of Family Engagement and Family Partnership Meetings. Ms. Zarris provided concrete consultation, planning, support, training and supervision to make these visions for change a reality and her belief that families really can change and that they truly know what is best for their children has greatly promoted the success of these programs. The shift in Virginia's practice with families has empowered them to be more responsible in making placement and service decisions which has resulted in a reduction of foster care placements and an increase of children remaining in their families safely. Her contributions to training include providing training to more than 4,000 social workers statewide in CPS, advance worker training in CPS, Foster Care, Adoptions, Strength Based Practice, Structured Decision Making, Differential Response and Risk Assessment. Workers at every level trust Betty Jo's advice and direction. During her tenure with the state, she understood the demands at the local level and the requirements at the state level and was able to bridge the gap that sometimes exists between the two. Her character and personal integrity truly make her an "Exceptional Child Protective Services Professional." When Ms. Zarris retired in December 2011, she has left a legacy of excellence for our social services system that will continue to improve the lives of Virginia's children and families for many years to come.

Candice Adams Elliott, LCSW, of Mecklenburg County, Virginia

Candice Elliott began her career with Mecklenburg Department of Social Services in 1977. In 1986 she was promoted to the Coordinator of the Child Protective Services Unit and has remained faithfully in this position. During the course of her career with Mecklenburg County DSS, Candice Elliott completed her Masters in Social Work degree and obtained her license as a

Clinical Social Worker. The skills and expertise she gained in her education and experience enabled Candice to build and pioneer a parenting program for Mecklenburg County that is considered outstanding. The juvenile courts highly support and regard Mrs. Elliott's class as the program of referral. She designed this program to give guidance to parents and children involved in abuse and neglect situations and specifically to focus on areas of parenting and anger management. Mrs. Elliott also founded an invaluable support group for families who have received custody of grandchildren, step-children and other family members. Mrs. Elliott has consistently recognized the importance of and supported the maintenance of the Mecklenburg County Multi-Discipline Team, which has met monthly for the past 25 years. Candice Elliott's commitment to her work has no set hours, no holidays and no vacations as she has placed her work as a priority in her life and has given hope and a future to the thousands of children she has served.

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