

John Kerry and David Shapiro Mentoring works for the state

BOSTON

Almost two years ago, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hampshire County brought Mark and Juan together. "Juan's like a little me!" says Mark, a former football player and UMass graduate. When they met, Juan, who had excelled in elementary school, was struggling in middle school: truancy, detentions, and failing grades. But he and Mark quickly bonded over a shared love of jokes, comic books, cooking, Chinese food, and of course, sports. Now Juan has renewed his commitment to school and helping around home, where he lives with his mother and two sisters.

Remarkable as it might seem, a small intervention from a well-intentioned adult mentor can make a transformative difference in a child's life. In short — mentoring works.

According to a recent report, Western Massachusetts is in desperate need of mentors — today. Mass Mentoring Counts, an update on the state of youth mentoring in the commonwealth, found that four of Massachusetts' 10 most underserved communities are located in the Western Massachusetts region: Holyoke, Pittsfield, Chicopee, and Springfield feature the largest gap between the number of sin-

gle-parent families in poverty and the number of formal mentoring relationships available. In fact, just one out of every 17 of these children has a formal mentoring relationship.

Mass Mentoring is the state's umbrella organization of more than 125 mentoring programs serving almost 20,000 kids. Today there are outstanding organizations in the area, including Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies, Railroad Street Youth Project, Girls Inc., and many others. But they need our support to expand their transformative work and meet the community's need by connecting young people with mentors.

A recent survey showed that 93 percent of Americans believe that mentoring is a good way to impact the outlook of our communities. We need to transform talk into action and translate these encouraging numbers into new mentoring relationships.

To do this, we have piloted several strategies, including leave-time policies where businesses encourage employees to mentor; expanded public and private funding for quality mentoring programs; high profile mentor recruitment campaigns, and continued research into the most effective mentoring practices for youth. We've had some success — but we need to encourage these efforts with more funding and continue to study the best ways to attract high-quality mentors capable of reaching those most in need.

Government can help, too. That's why the Mentoring for All Act [sponsored by Sen. Kerry] is so important. The bill would help grow mentoring programs

throughout Massachusetts and the rest of the country — ensuring that these mentoring programs get the support and resources that they need, so more of our state's youth can benefit.

The bill would grow state mentoring partnerships, like Mass Mentoring, so that they can recruit more mentors, have improved training abilities and reach the underserved parts of the state.

Young people benefit significantly from attention, guidance, and support from caring adults. In her book, "Stand by Me: The Risks and Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth," Dr. Jean Rhodes of UMass concludes that mentors influence young people in three vital ways: first, by enhancing social skills and emotional well-being; second, by improving cognitive skills through dialogue and listening and third, by serving as a role model and advocate.

As we continue to advocate for the Mentoring for All act, we encourage you to take individual action. Please, contact a mentoring program and become a mentor. It's not only the child that benefits — many mentors find their own lives profoundly enriched by this act of helping.

Mentoring programs are a simple and cost effective way to help ending the cycle of poverty, violence, and desperation hurting communities throughout Massachusetts — because, pure and simple, mentoring works.

Senator John Kerry is a Massachusetts Democrat. David Shapiro is CEO of Mass Mentoring.

