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HENRY BRINGS CHILDREN'S SAFETY FRONT AND CENTER AS KIDS HEAD BACK TO SCHOOL

Mayoral Candidate Calls for Initiation of Citywide Safe House Program

Fort Wayne, Indiana – As students get ready to slip on their backpacks and start off to school, Mayoral candidate Tom Henry today brought the issue of children's safety to the forefront with a concrete proposal to increase security for our youth and strengthen city neighborhoods. Henry presented plans to work with local school and public safety officials in the development of a Safe House program throughout Fort Wayne.

“No child in our community should ever be in a frightening or dangerous situation and not have a safe haven nearby,” stated Henry. “A Safe House program provides a safety network for our kids on their way to and from school or when they are out playing. It's simple. It's effective. It will protect our children. And it will make our neighborhoods stronger.”

Henry was joined at the announcement by Stacey and Stacy Kelsaw, Fort Wayne residents and parents, who have indicated a willingness to become Fort Wayne Safe House volunteers.

Safe Houses are homes, apartments, businesses, churches or other public buildings that serve as temporary safe harbors for children in trouble. When threatened, children in need can run to the nearest Safe House to seek short-term shelter. To make them easily identifiable, each Safe House will be designated with a special window sign or poster. The houses will be staffed by adult, community volunteers who have been trained and professionally screened.

The framework for Henry's Safe House program includes these components:

- The City of Fort Wayne will work with Fort Wayne Community Schools and other local school systems, the Fort Wayne Police Department, parent-teacher organizations, and Concerned Citizens' Watch, as well as neighborhood leaders, to develop the program;
- The schools, police department, parent-teacher organizations and neighborhood associations will work together to recruit volunteers;
- The police department will administer the program and do annual criminal background checks on all volunteers and occupants of the Safe Houses;

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- The schools will help to make children aware of the Safe Houses, distribute maps and teach them how to use them;
- Safe House volunteers are to provide assistance to children by offering them a secure environment and reassurance, calling the proper authorities (police, medical, etc.), and reporting relevant information, such as suspect descriptions or suspicious activities, to the proper authorities;
- Safe House volunteers are not to get directly involved in criminal situations, provide first aid except in life-threatening situations, or enforce laws; and
- The Safe House program will employ a distinctive logo that will become a neighborhood landmark. Its use will be permitted only by volunteers who have met, and continue to meet, program standards.

The blueprint for the Safe House initiative was created in the 1970s when a similar project flourished here. The concept gained national prominence in 1982 with the formation of the McGruff Safe Houses in Utah following several abductions there. McGruff the Crime Dog is the crime prevention education symbol of the National Crime Prevention Council. McGruff Houses are currently active in more than 600 communities nationwide. The McGruff House structure may be considered as the model for the local Safe House effort.

“There is nothing more precious than our children,” emphasized Henry. “As Mayor, safeguarding them and making Fort Wayne a safer city will be two of my lead priorities. Safe Houses are the open arms to shelter our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. They also send a message to those who would do harm that our neighborhoods are working together to fight crime.”

The Safe House program is anticipated to require minimal city funding. It will utilize existing resources and staff, and be incorporated into annual work plans.

Across America, safe houses have been shown to deter crime and reduce the victimization of children.

Tom Henry is a Democratic candidate for Mayor of Fort Wayne. He is a successful business owner, a five-term Fort Wayne City Councilman and a nonprofit leader with deep roots in the community.

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