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Agency helps families to talk

By **ROBERTA McCULLOCH-DEWS**

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Disagreements between family members can lead to deep-seated rifts if both sides refuse to hear what the other is saying.

The Community Dispute Resolution Center, a nonprofit mediation agency in Elmira, heals or prevents such family wounds. The center acts as a third party between family members to help them work out their differences. "It really is an opportunity for families to have a conversation in front of two mediators.

The mediators facilitate the conversation, but don't pass any judgment," says Rebecca Koch, the youth and family coordinator at the center, which has affiliate agencies in Schuyler and Tompkins counties. "As the two people are having a conversation, the mediator will reflect the same words (the family members) are using. By hearing it said by another party, they're sometimes able to hear it better and see where that other person is coming from."

Koch says the service is free, and that people discuss a wide range of issues.

"Teenagers and their parents or caregivers talk about issues as minor as curfew, house rules or even a fight and the fallout. They might also come in to discuss the teenager's (desire) to move out of the household."

The center uses an adult and teen mediator during each session, Koch says. "We use that model ... (because) it helps the family to see and hear an adult ... and teen person communicating effectively," she says. "It shows that we value the voices of both adults and teens."

When a person calls about using the center's service to resolve a dispute, Koch says she will first set up a time to complete an "intake," or a series of questions. She says the intake can be done to fit the person's schedule. "We can offer daytime, evening and weekend hours," Koch says.

She notes, however, that all parties must agree to the mediation for it to work. "If one person calls and wants (a mediation), I will have to contact the other people who will be involved." For more information about this service, call 607/734-9087.

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