FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**The Morgan County Partnership Holds a Legislative Breakfast**

By Megan Scott, Director of the Morgan County Partnership

On December 16, 2011, the Morgan County Partnership held its first Legislative Breakfast at First United Methodist Church in Berkeley Springs, WV. Representatives from the local, state, and federal levels spoke to the attendees about legislation that is being supported by our political leaders and representatives. Guest speakers for this event included: Kathleen Stotler, a representative from Senator Rockefeller’s Office, Keith McIntosh, a representative from Senator Manchin’s Office, Daryl Cowles, West Virginia Delegate, and Brenda Hutchinson, Morgan County Commissioner.

At the federal level, Senator Rockefeller has met with state leaders and introduced the Prescription Drug and Treatment Act of 2011, which begins to address the overall problem of unsafe use of methadone and other opioids. This bill calls for: New training requirements for health care professionals before they can be licensed to prescribe these drugs; consumer education on the safe use of painkillers and preventing diversion and abuse; basic clinical guidelines for safe use and dosage of pain medications, including methadone; increased federal support for state prescription drug monitoring programs; and comprehensive reporting of opioid-related deaths to help guide solutions.

Senator Manchin has proposed a three-point, common sense anti-drug abuse strategy that includes measures to combat drug abuse by banning bath salts and synthetic marijuana and increasing penalties for running “pill mills.” Mr. McIntosh further explained that the Senator has also unveiled his Retrain for Work Act. The bill would prioritize retraining for Americans who are unemployed, instead of delivering unemployment checks without a retraining condition.  Those who receive unemployment checks would be required to enroll in a state-certified job retraining program; continuing education such as high school, a GED credential program, or another state-recognized equivalent program, or an institution of higher education; and a state-recognized career and technical education program.

West Virginia Delegate, Daryl Cowles had just returned from a trip from Charleston, WV for a special legislative session on the Marcellas Shale Bill. He reported that the other hot topics to be addressed in the upcoming West Virginia legislative session include sky rocketing jail costs and post-employment benefits for public employees. In addition, legislatures will be looking at factors that contribute to our state’s unemployment rate. Cowles reported that out of those who are of age to work, 44 out of 100 people do not work in West Virginia, and that our state is ranked 49th in the nation in per capita income. The 2012 Legislative Session lasts a total of 60 days, starting in January. During this time, all bills must be introduced, except for special sessions. Typically, 2,000 bills are introduced per year but only 200 bills actually pass. During his presentation, Delegate Cowles explained the best strategy for getting concerns heard and passed during these sessions.

Locally, County Commissioner Brenda Hutchinson described the county’s legislative priorities for the upcoming session. A primary priority includes funding for a connector road from Route 522 to the new hospital and funding for improvements to Cacapon State Park. The County Commission agrees that improvements to the state park will help increase local jobs and tourism. In recent years, Morgan County has seen two resort/conference facilities close and it has resulted in losing business to Maryland and Virginia due to lack of adequate meeting space. The regional jail bill is also an issue locally. The 23rd Judicial Circuit is currently the 2nd largest in the state with 35,042 persons per judge. The Commission supports the request for 2 additional days per month for a Circuit Judge to be in the courthouse for criminal sentencing in an effort to reduce the regional jail bill. Other priorities include recalculating the Prevailing Wage so that it is based on regional wage scales in the state, instituting a reduced fee spay/neuter program along with education, and requesting that the sale of local foods be allowed in public schools.

For more information, contact the Morgan County Partnership at 304-258-7807. The Partnership is a local non-profit that works with the community to help build a supportive network of resources for our young people, their families, and others connected to them in order to create a safe, healthy, and drug free community. Contact us if you want to learn more about what we do and how you can get involved.