

They fight child abuse by training parents

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By Margaret Neubacher
staff writer

"Parenting is a very difficult job, one we're all thrown into with little or no training," said Ruth Turner, parent education coordinator for Family Focus.

The Birmingham-based child abuse prevention and intervention agency spends the bulk of its time working with parents.

Once parents learn some family life skills, they can be more responsible and less prone to crisis, said founder-director Dee Dize.

Turner and Dize oversee Family Focus, which will move into a new center in downtown Pontiac later this month.

"We will keep our office at Redeemer Lutheran Church at 1800 W. Maple Road," said Turner, "but will move our supplies and the most the family education classes to the (Pontiac) space we've been offered at the YMCA, at Wide Track and University."

Family Focus was founded 13 years ago on the premise that there isn't adequate help for parents. The non-profit agency started with only a consciousness-raising pitch they gave to anyone who would listen.

Today it provides a variety of services that have helped some 38,000 families in Oakland County, according to Dize.

What keeps it going is a steady stream of volunteers, donations and annual reports of child abuse.

LAST YEAR in Oakland County there were were 2,981 reported incidents of child abuse and neglect, according to the Michigan Department of Social Services.

"We see parents from all economic classes," Dize said. "We see an extreme range of problems as well — everything from neglect to parents who expect too much from their children."

"Parent education has grown in popularity over the past five years," Turner said. "In many middle class, average parents are seeking reaffirmation of their parenting skills. About 60 percent of the parents we see are not abusive. They have simply said, 'OK, I know this is a hard job. What can I do to be a better parent?'"

THROUGH ITS work, Family Focus has become well known in Oakland County's courts. County judges have ordered many parents to attend Family Focus family education classes.

"They try to heal families and refer many of them to us for help," said Dize, a grandmother four times.

Last fall the Oakland probate judges, in a letter to the state DSS, endorsed Family Focus and its proposal for a new center. Similar letters of support were also written by the Oakland County Community Mental Health Services, a caseworker for the county juvenile court, and a local psychologist. All have worked closely with the agency.

Family Focus also provides the services of a group of credentialed professionals called family aids. They meet and work with families in their home.

ANOTHER Family Focus service is the parent response phone, which provides an instant source of information and support for parents.

"We get calls from abusers, those afraid of abusing and those who suspect a neighbor is abusing. We answer questions and make a lot of referrals. Any one who answers this line has had at least 25 hours of training by social workers, communication specialists and child development specialists," Turner said.

To get the new center in Pontiac under way, Family Focus is looking to raise about \$10,000, said Dize. The agency has received \$3,000 in donations from such groups as the Junior League of Birmingham, the Troy Junior Women's Club and Church Women United. Another \$3,000 of gifts have been in-kind services, furniture, curtains and paint.

The agency is hoping to receive some money from the state's Child Abuse Trust Fund this year. The fund, established by the legislature almost two years ago, receives funds from a \$2 check-off box

on Michigan personal income tax forms. The fund helps private and non-profit agencies which work to strengthen families.

"Unfortunately the fund has received only a small amount of money," Turner said.

Money is needed to get the primary program in place at the new center, Dize said. The agency's plans are to establish what it calls a Parent-Child Center in Pontiac. There it will furnish child care for parents who are attending meetings and classes as well as provide information and referrals.

The agency also needs money for such things as educational games and supplies, equipment for infants and toddlers' room, trained child care workers, and office supplies, Dize said.

And still there are plans for expanding the program, if possible.

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