

Neglected Volunteer Bureau closes up shop

by Teri Banas
staff writer

Rosemary Sheehan kept turning the question over in her mind.

"The frustrating thing that keeps working through my mind is, did we miss something?" she asked rhetorically this week.

"Then, she answered for herself: 'No, we didn't. We just weren't making any headway.'"

President of the board of directors for the Oakland County Volunteer Bureau, Sheehan was interviewed following the full board's decision recently to close the volunteer agency after 18 years.

Interviews and referrals will continue through Saturday, Dec. 7.

In those 18 years, the bureau has worked like an employment agency — matching potential volunteers and their interests with needed volunteer positions in almost 250 volunteer agencies based in Oakland County.

BUT INCREASINGLY in recent years, the bureau found itself "underutilized" by area agencies, many of which have become sophisticated enough to seek their own volunteers without outside assistance.

"We concluded we were just redundant," said Sheehan, who had been with the bureau since starting as an interviewer in 1978. "The statistics kept coming in, and we decided that there wasn't much point in our justifying our existence further when there wasn't a need."

The decision, if difficult, wasn't unexpected.

The bureau, housed in Birmingham's United Methodist Church, had spent the past several months in an intense self-evaluation. A recent survey of 250 area agencies, which it had kept on the books for volunteer referrals, found that only 80 were still active.

"Many agencies that had relied on the bureau for the interview screening were now performing that function themselves. More have their own full-time directors and volunteer coordinators."

THE BUREAU'S own fund-raising



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Rosemary Sheehan
sad closing

efforts had been hampered in recent years by difficulties in documenting placements. In anticipation of the closing, this year it suspended fund raising.

"But the problem wasn't in the fund raising. It was in how that money was spent," Sheehan added. "We were spending a lot of money to interview on the average maybe two people a day at \$70 each. Now, that's not very cost-effective."

During its peak period, the center averaged 500-600 volunteer placements a year, she recalled, leading into a discussion on the changing nature of volunteerism.

IN ITS 18 years of operation, the bulk of their resources were middle-aged, non-working women.

"A lot of potential volunteers have now been absorbed into the workforce," she said. This single social trend has had a big impact on the draining volunteer pool.

"For many years this was a great place for women trying to get into the workforce to improve their work skills. Some of them did find paying jobs and were absorbed."

Near the end of its operation, the center began seeing other types of vol-

unteers. On this particular afternoon, she noted, two men entered the bureau to inquire about volunteer work. Both men work full time in their own businesses.

More elderly residents are joining up, she noted.

"Something has happened," she said. "It's kind of a social phenomenon."

THE BUREAU'S history dates back to 1967 when it was formed by the United Community Services organization and the Junior League of Birmingham.

In 1981 it was dropped by the UCS organization. It operated instead on private donations and fund-raising efforts like garage sales. The office was run jointly by part-time office managers Keene Reese and Nancy Zint in recent times.

Sheehan, who once served as a suburban New Jersey mayor before moving back to the Detroit area in 1987, said the closing will be a sad occasion for those who were close to the operation.

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