

Multiracial-cultural council offers new help hot line

BY RICHARD PEARL
STAFF WRITER

The Human Relations Help-Line, a confidential telephone service for residents needing help in resolving racial or cultural conflicts, is expected to be in operation Nov. 1.

The referral service, believed the first of its kind in metro Detroit and possibly the nation, was announced Monday night at the Farmington City Council meeting to an enthusiastic reception from both city officials and council members.

Farmington City Manager Frank Laubhoff said the helpline will take the work of the sponsoring Multicultural/Multiracial Community Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills "to that next level of concern."

The service will be "a big part of enhancing" the quality of life in the two communities, he said.

Councilwoman Kate McShane, noting the helpline was at least two years in the making from the time the idea was conceived, expressed great pleasure at seeing it come to fruition.

And Farmington Mayor Mary Bush added that it is "certainly a model for the state and even for the country."

The helpline, the number for which will be announced closer to its inception, will offer a means by which callers can leave confidential messages about problems and be referred to the appropriate existing community agencies for help.

It will operate 24 hours a day, with MCMR Co-Chairs Karen Bolson and Jim Hall serving as the primary and backup monitors, respectively.

Callers will leave recorded messages to which Bolson or Hall will reply. The two will have an access code to protect

caller confidentiality.

Detailed confidential reports will be kept to help MCMR monitor the helpline's effectiveness.

"It is a referral service, not a (telephone) line that will in itself solve problems," emphasized Bolson, who attributed the idea to MCMR's incident committee. "We're not looking to be heroes," said Hall but rather to provide a service that makes it easier for those seeking direction to find it.

"We don't have a lot of heated racial or cultural issues in our community," Bolson said, "but we do have a lot of new residents, and this is one more line of open communications."

"That's not to say the current line isn't working; it's not to say there are a lot of problems. It's just a proactive step towards making our community better," she said.

Both she and Hall cited the

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Jim Hall
—Monitor

continuing influx of people from eastern European and Middle Eastern countries — "Our school district has over 60 languages or dialects spoken" by students, Bolson noted.

For such people who may have lived under government repression calling the police for help would be the last thing they would think to do.

Conversely, noted Hall, native-born Americans also can get help from the helpline. For instance, he said, they may not realize or

understand cultural differences they encounter with immigrants.

Hall, a Hills-based Realtor, related an incident in which he was trying to help a client, a recently widowed Arabic woman.

The woman's 16-year-old son "kept butting in — in fact, he shut his mother up" and that frustrated Hall until he later learned from his Chaldean secretary that, in many Middle-East cultures, the second-eldest male assumes the leadership role in a family in such situations.

"Unless you make a concerted effort to acquaint yourself with different cultures coming in" to the area, "you just don't know" what's going on, Hall said. And the immigrants "don't know what we see as being different or odd."

"If a person has what they perceive as a conflict or misunderstanding," he said, "we want them to know we are sufficiently staffed (so) that we can direct them to the area where they can probably get their questions answered."

The Multicultural/Multiracial Council is dedicated to the principle that "racial, religious, cultural and ethnic diversity in our community will be respected, nurtured and celebrated."

It is supported by money from both city councils, the Farmington Public Schools district and other community organizations as well as private donations.

Former editor honored with journalism award

Lois Vagnozzi, editor of the Detroit Teacher, official newspaper of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, was presented with the Albert Shanker Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Federation of Teachers Communication Association at a journalism awards dinner in Washington, D.C.

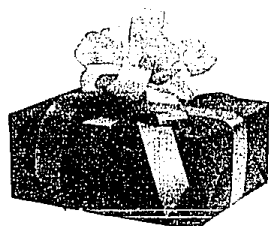
The award was presented "in recognition of a lifetime of service and dedication to the

advancement of the goals of the AFT and the labor movement." It is named in honor of the late longtime president of the teachers' federation.

The AFTCA has also established a fund to help editors from small locals attend AFTCA journalism conferences. The fund was named the Lois Vagnozzi Labor Communicators Assistance Fund.

Vagnozzi was also honored with two special awards for the Detroit Teacher newspaper. The paper won honors for general excellence in covering the 1996 election campaign and another, general excellence award from the International Labor Communications Association in the 1997 journalism awards competition.

After being editor of the Detroit Teacher newspaper for 23 years, Vagnozzi retired in June.



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