



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Jean Vickers is St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center program director.

Center has adapted to changes

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BUT TIMES have changed and so has the center. The milk lab is gone. The center is no longer involved in the state adoption process. A 1979 state law prohibiting children 6 years and younger from institutionalization spelled the closing of the center's well-known nursery.

"Today, about 95 percent of the young women are keeping their infants. Years ago, we would have had that 95 percent giving up their babies for adoption," said Vickers.

"There's a variety of reasons for this. It's not simply a matter of, 'I decided to get pregnant, so I'll keep the baby,'" Vickers said. "There are complicated factors of why very young women are getting pregnant and keeping their infants."

It is because of the complications facing young unwed mothers and their infants that the center has changed and restructured its programming. Often, the unwed mothers, many abused themselves, have no where to go. They lack parenting and independent living skills and are for the most part uneducated.

Each of the center's six programs caters to specific needs of children and their families ranging from unwed teen mothers to abused and emotionally disturbed children who cannot live with their families.

Where once adoptions were a focus, today the center is heavily involved in residential care programs for children with problems of the 1980s — abuse, neglect, chemically dependent families and emotional disturbances, Vickers said.

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center program director

"THE DEMAND now is from families with problems — alcohol abuse, severe mental illness — they are just incapable at this point of taking care of their kids. And the kids develop their own problems trying to cope," Vickers said.

At one time, the center's cottages were home to 16 children each supervised by one sister. What began as custodial care led by the sisters has become strong treatment and therapy for complex problems.

The goal, Vickers said, is to reunite the children with their families, if possible. If not, the center offers a specialized foster care program. "We did find we were dealing with children who could make great strides, but their families could not," Vickers said. "We will find a

home for them."

To date, six children have been adopted by their foster parents after their natural parents' rights were terminated, Vickers said.

The center's future is expected to be as varied as its past. Center officials are looking at what is called an early intervention program to help young unwed mothers stay at home with their families.

"We want to be able to have someone on a phone say, 'where are you, we'll pick you up and talk to mom,'" Vickers said. "Often, though, a teen mom is running from abuse. But if it's just a matter of crisis, we can help through it."

THE FUTURE also holds opportunities for modifying and improving the center's current programs, such as taking a different focus to work more effectively with the more difficult children, Vickers said.

A third window on the future includes helping older children who more than likely won't get into a foster home and won't be adopted. Group homes or an independent living program might be the answer.

Finally, as with the rest of society, the center is also looking at child day care of one form or another. "Obviously, day care is a very hot topic. It's very desperately needed," Vickers said.

Center officials also will look at programs for parents involved in day care, how to determine the best service for their family circumstances, for example. Infant mental health also will be a new topic.

"Our philosophy at the center is, 'let's support the family, it's the best place for children to be nurtured and grow,'" Vickers said.

Center's roots traced back hundreds of years

St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center's roots can be traced back hundreds of years to France.

The Farmington Hills center's history goes back to St. Vincent De Paul, who founded the first non-cloistered religious order of women, the Daughters of Charity. The first Daughters were wealthy, dedicated Parisian women whose mission was to visit, nurse and feed the sick, poor and abandoned.

Today, St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center's six programs for children and families are named after women instrumental in the Daughters of Charity and the institutions created by their members and friends over the centuries. Marillac Hall, for example, bears the name of one of St. Vincent's helpers of long ago, St. Louise de Marillac. With four other women, she created what is now the largest religious community of women in the Catholic Church.

Another recognizable name at the Farmington Hills center is St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. She planted the American roots of the Daughters of Charity in 1809 when she organized a community in Maryland.

But the Detroit area's history with the Daughters of Charity began in 1844 with a school. A year later, the sisters converted part of the school at Larned and Randolph into a 30-bed hospital to care for cholera and smallpox patients. The hospital was the first in Michigan and the Northwest Territory.

By 1909, the Daughters built a new facility on West Grand Boulevard with a major portion of the building devoted to the St. Ann's Department, which served the unwed mothers and 200 infants and toddlers who were left in the sister's care.

In the 1920s, the Daughters acquired a farm at 12 Mile and Inkster (then Townline Road) as a summer camp for the children who lived in the hospital complex.

IT WAS after the home, Villa Marillac, burned down in 1928, that the reason for the Sarah Fisher name becomes clear. Fisher and her husband, Charles T. Fisher, donated \$750,000 to rebuild the home. Along with a bequest from Nanette Lansing Reilly, the Sarah Fisher Center opened in November 1929. By 1946, the St. Vincent Home on McDougall was closed and the girls moved to the Sarah Fisher Home.

"At the time, it was a very state-of-the-art facility," said center program director Jean Vickers, referring to the center's on-campus cottages. "It was an advanced concept for the time."

When Farmington Hills was still miles from no where, children at St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center were bused to a number of Catholic schools. One of the Daughters of Charity always rode with the children to and from school.



Photo courtesy St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center

New lawmaker learns her way around Lansing

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She trounced Democratic opponent John Dolan of Bingham Farms in the November general election for the 69th state House seat.

In late November, Dolan attended a three-day orientation with other newly elected legislators. The state House clerk and assistant clerk did most of the talking. It was some of the things she heard about the realities of being a legislator that stuck in her mind. When torn on a vote, the clerk said to always "remember who sent you here," Dolan said.

"He said don't think you're going to come up here and change the world. He said, you're better off to take it slow, learn the process."

AND THAT'S what she's been doing — settling up shop. Getting to know who's who and deciding as much as she can, how she wants to handle her new role.

No. As one of the fledgling legislators, she won't be moving into Sandy Brotherton's old office. But his secretary, Sally, and his 69th District phone number will stay with Dolan. She's not sure yet on which com-

mittees she'll serve. But she is pretty sure that as a newcomer the choice won't solely be hers. Dolan will sit on the committees of the committees, which allocates who will serve on which committee.

As a longtime member of the federated garden clubs and with an equally long interest in the environment, Dolan's first choice for a committee assignment is the conservation and environment committee. Her second choice would be on the public health committee, also up her alley because of her years of service on the Botsford General Hospital

Board of Directors.

Dolan's had plenty of time since the November election to determine just how she wants to handle her job and stay in touch with her constituency. She plans to commute to Lansing daily from her Farmington Hills apartment. She plans to spend at least four days in Lansing. "How I spend the days will depend on the committees I end up on and the way (the legislative) sessions are scheduled," Dolan said.

THERE'S NO doubt she'll carve her own niche in Lansing rather than filling Brotherton's shoes. She's

conferred with him, listened to him. "I plan to do some things differently because it's me," she said.

Dolan plans to step in at council meetings in the 69th District, including Farmington, Farmington Hills, Southfield Township and the villages of Beverly Hills, Franklin and Bingham Farms. She'll be in touch with city managers and elected officials. "I've been working on learning more about other areas, like Southfield

Township," Dolan said. "The problems (with the communities) are similar."

Dolan says she'll miss the long-term relationships she established during her 14 years on the Farmington Hills City Council. It was there that she learned patience and that nothing occurs overnight. And she plans on taking these lessons to Lansing with her. "It takes years up there to get things through. In Lans-

ing it's not as issue oriented as it is party oriented," Dolan said.

She has the same advice for the city council that she is keeping in mind for herself as she goes to Lansing: "The biggest thing they have to remember in the back of their minds is, what's best for the community. In Lansing, Michigan should be the goal. Even though you represent a district, you should have the whole (state) in mind."

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