

As road crews work to resurface roads throughout Oakland County, other longer term projects still ongoing include:



Helping kids:
Judy Hoefle (left), executive director of the Child Abuse and Neglect Council, and Janet Voorheis, the agency's prevention education director, sit in one of the therapy rooms of the council's Pontiac office. Hoefle is hoping to interest community leaders in forming an advocacy network for abused children.

STAFF PHOTO BY
TOM HOFFMEYER

Network to protect future generations

BY BECKY BURNS
STAFF WRITER

When Judy Hoefle was diagnosed with breast cancer this spring, she found herself at the center of an extensive community support network, with doctors, nurses and advocates helping her every step of the way.

"It became a much easier route for me," Hoefle said.

But it also made the Birmingham resident wonder why there wasn't a similar support system in place for child victims of sexual and physical abuse. As executive director of Oakland County's Child Abuse and Neglect Council, Hoefle began to envision the possibilities for a community-wide network for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Her experience, and the ideas she generated from it, played right into a concept the Pontiac-based council had already begun working on with several other local agencies: Protect Our Future Child Watch.

Created several years ago by the national Children's Defense Fund, Child Watch was designed to give communities a firsthand look at how the children in their communities are living. The new local initiative, made up of a coalition of more than 25 organizations, is striving to protect future generations by building awareness of problems today's kids face and by advocating solutions to help those who can't help themselves.

The first Oakland County event will take place on Monday, Sept. 29, in the form of a bus tour that will take invited community leaders along the north Woodward corridor, first to the neonatal unit of a local hospital to discuss what can be done before birth to prevent abuse, then to talk with abuse and neglect victims who receive sup-

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—Judy Hoefle, executive director of Oakland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council

port from local human service agencies.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, a child is reported abused or neglected every 11 seconds in the United States. Every 53 minutes, a child dies from poverty. And every two hours, a child is murdered.

Last year in Oakland County, Hoefle said, law enforcement agencies reported 1,300 substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect — an average of more than three a day. "That means no questions asked. It was real and that child was removed from the home," she said, adding that law enforcement received more than 10,000 calls.

It's a problem throughout the country, said state Sen. Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham: "It crosses all economic lines and all geographic lines. To have anyone presume that because we happen to live in a community that is strong economically, child abuse or neglect does not exist, unfortunately is not true."

Though Bouchard can't attend the bus tour, he plans to send a representative from his staff.

Janet Voorheis, the council's prevention education director, cited other statistics that 20 percent of American children are at risk of being abused or

neglected. Voorheis, of Waterford, believes that with education and prevention, that figure could be reduced "almost to nothing." But it's going to take a community-wide effort, involving political, religious and business leaders, something she hopes will begin with the Child Watch bus tour.

The morning of the tour will begin at The Community House in Birmingham, where three child victims will tell their personal stories. One, an 8-year-old who had been sexually assaulted, will share a notebook she's been keeping while working with a therapist from the council.

"If you keep sexual or severe physical abuse hidden, can you imagine what that would do to your psyche in terms of being a productive human being?" Hoefle said.

Research continues to show that people abused or neglected in childhood often go on to perpetuate the cycle as adults, and end up costing society in terms of jail time and other social services, she added.

The goal of the bus tour, Voorheis said, is to open leaders' eyes to the reality of child abuse in Oakland County in the hopes of inciting them to act on it in their communities. It will be the first of many educational events.

"Child Watch is critical because it's saying to leaders . . . we just want you to get on the bus and see what it can be like for a child out there," Hoefle said.

In each individual case, Voorheis said, education ahead of time is what will begin to curb the abuse. "I say prevention up front . . . it's late when you have to find the cure."

Bouchard believes that education is especially important for community leaders. "Before you can ever solve a problem," he said, "you have to understand it."

Child Watch boosters

Oakland County Child Watch is an initiative made up of 25 local organizations. Its mission is to provide community leaders with trivisual issues that help children lead productive and healthy lives.

The following are the groups that make up the Oakland County Child Watch coalition:

Baldwin Church and Center

Baldwin Public Library

Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County

Oakland County Community Coordinated Child Care Council

Common Ground

Ewald Motion Pictures Inc.

HAVEN

Harmonwick Hospital

Healthy Start Organization

Oakland County Partnership

Judson Center

Junior League of Birmingham,

Mich. Inc.

Michigan's Children

Oakland County Family Independence Agency

Oakland County Health Department

Oakland County Probate Court

Oakland Family Services

Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency

Paula Schonberg & Associates

Pontiac Oakland Visiting Nurse Association

Representative Pan Godchaux's Office

St. Andrew Lutheran Church

St. John United Methodist Church

St. Joseph Mercy Oakland Children's Learning Center

The Community House

Woo Friends Home Day Care

County mulls independent CMH authority

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

With controversy swirling around the delivery of mental health services in Oakland County, one question lingers:

Should Oakland County adopt a community mental health authority independent of the County Board of Commissioners?

County Executive L. Brooks Patterson raised that question rhetorically Friday when asked about the ongoing struggle between Oakland County commissioners and the Oakland County Community Mental Health (CMH) Board.

Patterson is not directly involved in the struggle. He distanced himself from CMH after commissioners rejected his offer to assume responsibility for mental health and operate it as another department within the county structure of government.

But the CMH — and its \$157 million budget — is too significant to be ignored.

Patterson does not support or oppose Oakland County switching to a mental health authority. But in response to questions, he asked: " Might be the most logical way to resolve all the problems?"

The chair of the county board agrees. "That's a possibility," said John P. McCullough, who is also chair of a task force reviewing the pros and cons of going to a CMH authority.

"Some of the people most ardently opposed to an authority are taking a second look at it," said McCullough, a Royal Oak Republican.

Problems and turmoil are nothing new to the system that delivers mental health service to about 30,000 residents — including some in group homes — who are mentally ill or developmentally disabled.

But over the last three years, the clamor over mental health services seems to be growing.

At Thursday's county board meeting, for example, CMH matters dominated the often heated discussions. By the end of the day, commissioners had:

■ Back peddled on a resolution to censure 11 volunteers on the Community Mental Health Board

and its director.

On the advice of their attorney, commissioners postponed the resolution that also demanded the immediate resignation of the board members and director Sandra M. Lindsey.

■ Extended for 30 days, contracts — affecting more than 120 clients with disabilities or mental problems — with Training and Treatment Innovations (TTI), the service provider that is suing CMH and 16 county commissioners.

■ Demanded competitive bidding for future CMH contracts — including the TTI extensions.

Commissioners insisted on competitive bidding despite comments from the county chief money man and the CMH director, Robert J. Daddow, director of management and budget, said 30 days was not enough time to draft specifications, advertise and review bids and award contracts. Lindsey said, "Thirty days might be enough time (for competitive bidding), but some clients will likely suffer."

■ Heard people — including William McMasters of Birmingham — criticize Lindsey as an inept administrator.

■ Heard other people — including county commissioner Fran Amos, R-Waterford — praise Lindsey as an able and effective administrator.

After initially voicing strong opposition to an authority, County Commissioner Dan Devine Jr., R-Bloomfield Hills, seemed more receptive to the idea this week.

Core problems would have to be addressed first, said Devine, "and I still have the same concerns I had last year. But if an authority could bring accountability and guarantee input from clients, I'd be willing to consider it."

One of those with serious concerns about an authority is commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield. He, among others, is concerned an independent authority would not be responsive.

"We get calls all the time from people who claim CMH is not responsive," Pernick said. "What would happen if we went to an authority, and CMH was even more autonomous?"

Opinions differ on change

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Oakland officials could be reviewing a plan to put the delivery of mental health services in the hands of an autonomous authority as early as November.

But that could be a "terrible mistake," according to the president of the county chapter of Alliance for the Mentally Ill (AMI).

An authority — instead of the existing Community Mental Health Board — would remove county commissioners from the mental health system, said Hope Cummings of AMI, perhaps the largest single advocacy group for mental health services.

"Commissioners are the people we go to when CMH board members won't listen," said Cummings, of Farmington Hills.

Since last year, a task force has been looking at the feasibility of an authority. Under current law, the system is overseen by the 12-member CMH board (there's one vacancy) whose members are appointed by the county board of commissioners.

The CMH board is expected to work in concert with county commissioners who maintain indirect control.

With an authority, CMH officials would be appointed by commissioners and then be autonomous.

John P. McCullough, R-Royal Oak, who is chair of the board of commissioners and chair of the authority task force, said an authority would control the \$167 million annual budget and hire (and supervise) a director. The main advantage, McCullough said, is financial independence and accountability.

Tax dollars allocated for general government could not be diverted to mental health purposes. Nor could mental health dollars go into the general fund.

West Bloomfield resident Calvin J. Lippitt, however, sees another advantage — an authority would have more flexibility in allocating mental health services. More flexibility would mean more efficiency, said Lippitt, who is currently on the CMH board.