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Agency Makes A Mark

No one denied, help never ends

By Sue Maccia (Special to The Times)

LAMBERTVILLE—People who use social services get used to other people behind desks averting their eyes.

They grow accustomed to comments like, “We can't help you” or “Regrets, but we have to discontinue your participation in the program.” Like a bad marriage, the relationship between the agency and the needy often seems strained.

Fisherman's Mark in Lambertville is very different.

“We never close client cases and we never refuse service,” said Barbara Petty, founder and executive director of the non-profit social service organization. “All we require from clients is responsibility, respect and civility” —a word she frequently uses.

With a staff of nine, Fisherman's Mark serves clients in four New Jersey counties—Hunterdon, Mercer, Warren and Somerset—and Montgomery and Bucks counties in Pennsylvania. They serve a very high load of 900 families.

“We don't turn anyone away, no matter where they're from,” said Petty. That could be as far away as Washington State.

“Sometimes, you work with people and they move away for whatever reason,” Petty explained. Should problems arise in their new location, Petty and staff are just a phone call away—always ready to walk clients through the bureaucratic maze of social services in their new location.

“Sometimes families living elsewhere will call about another family member or friend in our area who needs help. We seek them out and

provide it. It's just that simple. It's the right thing to do," she said.

It's this degree of compassion that assures the volumes of people who come to Fisherman's Mark that they are not alone—no matter what.

Petty is a former medical student and the daughter of a test pilot. She worked at IBM and at Mobil Oil, where she wrote chemistry patents. She's married with three sons and she took a job at Hunterdon Occupational Training Center in Flemington (now the Center for Education Advancement) in the late '70s.

"I thought the (job training) program was worthwhile," Petty said, "but too often people were let go because they hadn't learned enough within set time limits."

For Petty there was something "uncivil" about that. "It was just sort of, 'the bus will not be picking you up on Monday morning,'" And it bothered her enough to get her thinking that, perhaps, she could do better.

So in 1980, after talking with the Rev. Richard Townley of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Lambertville, she decided to set up shop in buildings adjacent to the church on Main Street and provide the no-strings-attached client services not available anywhere else.

Job coordination and training—with virtually no time limits—remain a lynchpin of the Fisherman's Mark program.

"You wouldn't believe the photos I get in the mail each day. One was from a man saying how well he and his family are doing now that he has his Commercial Driver's License," which Petty was instrumental in helping him attain.

The food pantry—meant to get clients on their feet—is open to anyone as long as they need it. Questions are never asked. Stocked with donations and purchases Petty makes through food co-ops and other sources, she credits the Bonner Foundation of Princeton and stores including the Giant in New Hope and Shop Rite in Flemington and others for keeping the pantry full.

“I don't know what we'd do for coffee without Starbucks (New Hope),” Petty said, calling coffee one of those high-ticket items hard to get. “They just call us and say if you can pick it up, it's yours.”

Starbucks, she said, sends pastries and other delicacies to spruce up the basic foodstuffs in the pantry. Pickups are never a problem. She just calls on several of her 700 volunteers and it's done.

“We always have to check outside the door each day for food left by anonymous donors, too,” Petty said. “It's wonderful. The community really supports us.”

The range of programs provided by the organization at the Elvin K. Smith Community Center is like one-stop social service shopping and it's all free, except for day-care and after-school programs at The Mark's Lambertville Academy that are provided on an ability-to-pay basis.

Client services include problem solving and needs clarification, resource identification, information and referral services, education, advocacy and follow up.

Within that framework, clients get help in housing, jobs, educational opportunities, food, clothing and emotional support.

“Clients often come in because they're confused about, say, a gas shut-off notice. We help them make the call and get things straightened out,” Petty said.

The mission of The Mark is clear, she said: to help clients define the scope of their need; to assist them in acquiring information specific to their situation; to build trust; to encourage self-reliance and responsibility; to continue support through setbacks and delays; and to develop programs that address specific community needs.