

Darien agencies helping during difficult times

Written by Kathy Lake

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I never imagined having to do this. I've never had to ask for help before, and I don't really know where to start."

Those words, or variations of them, are the first words heard more and more often by staff at Person-to-Person from people seeking the agency's assistance.

As the economic crisis has worsened, agencies such as Person-to-Person and Darien Social Services are reporting that not only is the demand for their services growing, but also that the profile of clients who need those services is changing.

"People are coming in for help who have contributed to us in the past," said Marina Thomas, the director of social services for Person-to-Person.

Thomas said the agency is seeing new clients from Stamford, Darien and New Canaan, the areas it serves, everyday and that many of them are people who never expected to find themselves in such dire circumstances. Just the volume of new clients alone is astounding. In the seven-week period from Jan. 1 to Feb. 19, 532 new families registered with Person-to-Person for assistance, compared with 400 new families registered during the eight weeks in January and February last year — a 33 percent increase, with still another week to go in February.

The reasons that people who were once financially stable now need help are varied, Thomas said. Certainly job loss is primary, but other people may have run through their savings because of illness or other unforeseen circumstances; may have planned on selling their house and downsizing, but now can't sell; may find their retirement funds are no longer sufficient to meet their needs; or may be faced with a combination of such problems. The typical age of new clients from Darien, Thomas said, is mostly people in their 50s and 60s, up through the very elderly.

And because many are in unfamiliar territory, not only might they be reluctant to ask for help, but they also don't know where to go.

"They're not only in a different situation financially, they're not even familiar with any of the resources available," Thomas said, noting that the complexity of several individual situations have posed new challenges for Person-to-Person staff.

Thomas's observations were echoed by nearly every member of Darien's Human Services Planning Council, including Darien Social Services, Child Guidance, Family Centers, the Center for Hope, the YWCA and St. Luke's Church. All reported an increase in the need for assistance and a growing number of people with stress-related problems made worse by the economy.

Part of the mission of Darien's Human Services Planning Council is to continually take the pulse of the town, so to speak, to determine if its residents are hale and hearty or if they are ailing and deficient in some way. If the answer is the latter, the other part of its mission is to try to find a cure, or at least alleviate some of the symptoms.

That's how the planning council's C.A.R.E. Campaign came about, as a remedy to help remind people to be accountable for their actions and to treat each other with respect and kindness. Starting next week, C.A.R.E. Darien will follow its own advice by sponsoring two workshops to assist local families

who may be facing job loss or other economic difficulties.

The first is a Career Management Seminar to be presented at the Darien Community Association on Tuesday, March 3, from 9:30 to 11 a.m. and again on Wednesday, March 11, from 7:30 to 9 p.m.

Conducting the workshop will be John Bassler, recently retired general manager of Korn/Ferry International; Douglas Campbell, CEO of the Success Coach; and Harry Geller, former vice president of Right Management Consultants.

At the second workshop, community leaders will present a panel discussion entitled Recession-Proofing Your Family. This will include tips on talking with your children about job loss, maintaining family closeness during times of stress, promoting positive coping skills and locating resources for oneself or friends in need.

Other community offerings focusing on such topics as career change, job seeking and stress management are being offered by Family Centers and The Center for Hope and by the YWCA.

For information on the workshops or on resources offering assistance, call the Community Fund of Darien at 655-8775 or visit CommunityFundDarien.org.

This column was written under the aegis of the Community Fund of Darien Human Services Planning Council. More information, 655-8775. E-mail to Kathy Lake at katla17@optonline.net.