

Needy find assistance near home

06/15/06 *By Allison Levine*

Delores Rodriguez of Park Heights watched helplessly last October as a Child Protective Services worker took her 15-year-old daughter away and placed her in foster care.

"I felt like something was missing from my life because she was not with me and I worried about her all the time," said Rodriguez, 41.



The unemployed, single mother of four had been ordered by a court to take parenting and job readiness classes at the Roland Park-based agency Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland if she was to win back her daughter.

Rodriguez said she welcomed the counseling from the private, nonprofit agency.

"I didn't feel like a great parent. I needed to do a lot of soul-searching. I had to turn my life around. I learned self-control, that each child is an individual and to spend more time and talk with my children. I had to make a big change - spiritually, physically and mentally - and learn to become a strong person."

By February, Rodriguez's daughter was home again.

She gives the nonprofit agency a lot of the credit because "they were very supportive of me and I could talk to them about everything."

A place to turn

Founded in 1849 to help families make the transition from farming to industry, Family and Children's Services today helps 10,000 people a year, from children and families to seniors and the disabled.

Based at 4623 Falls Road, the agency has 20 programs in 15 satellite offices in Baltimore City and County, and Carroll, Howard, Anne Arundel and Harford counties.

"In many instances, we provide services they cannot get elsewhere," said Executive Director Stanley Levi, a licensed social worker.

With 330 full- and-part-time employees and a budget of \$11.1 million, the agency offers programs including adult day care, family counseling and after-school care for middle school girls. Some programs are free; charges for others are based on a sliding scale based on income and family size.

Family and Children's Services gets its funds from government and United Way grants, client fees and fundraisers. The agency sends out an annual appeal letter and holds two major annual fundraisers, including a dinner dance at the American Visionary Art Museum.

Different counties offer different programs, depending on resident needs and the issues that are most often addressed in a locality.

For example, Carroll and Baltimore counties provide domestic violence services where "we identify what happened, help develop a safety plan, talk about how they can move on with their lives and determine (what) resources they will need to move on," Levi said.

Other services include a children's abuse treatment program, a foster grandparents' program, in-home services for adults with disabilities and senior citizens, and an employee assistance program.

Satisfied clients

Mary Guth of Roland Park has been getting in-home housekeeping and escort services from Family and Children's Services since she recovered from a stroke several months ago. The retired psychiatric social worker used to work for the agency, so she knew about its services.

"They really do provide high quality, professional services. Their people are very well trained. I continue over the years to recommend them."

Verna Day, 81, of west Baltimore, has received in-home services once a week since she had a hip replacement last year. The former Miss Senior Maryland can do most things on her own but receives home care help with laundry, changing linens, housework and driving.

"I still have to keep my independence," said Day, who works for a tour company, Renaissance Tours, as an actress, playing Harriet Tubman in a one-woman show at Orchard Street Church in downtown Baltimore.

"I do not plan on becoming an invalid. With what I am going through, I could become one, but that is not Verna."

Karen Jackson, program coordinator for the agency's Family Support Center at 4236 Pimlico Road, said the center teaches parents to be more family-oriented and learn techniques for bonding with their children.

The center offers nutritional advice, budget management, relationship skills, lifestyle skills and cultural experiences.

"Offering child development classes keeps parents aware of what level the child should be on at a certain age and parenting classes give them the skills to deal with their children and even how to deal with themselves," said Jackson. "It helps them deal with low self-esteem, anger management, and it teaches all aspects of child care."

Retired printer Victoria Gill, 66, of northeast Baltimore, is studying for her Graduate Equivalency Diploma.

"It is something I have always wanted, but I stopped school because I became a teenage mother - and at that time, they didn't offer these opportunities. Then I got married and became a mother of eight."

'A much better parent'

Rodriguez said that, thanks to the agency, "I am a much better parent."

She is also more focused and organized. Education and schooling for her children have become a priority.

"Every aspect of everything my children go through, I am with them," she said, adding that she still takes classes at the agency.

"Give it a try. They are great people. ... I enjoy myself and have learned a whole lot."

For more information about Family and Children's Services or to make a donation, visit www.fcsmd.org or call 410-366-1980.