

25 Years Of Caring

Webster-Rock Hill Ministries has been assisting low-income residents since 1982

by Marty Harris - August 17, 2007

Twenty five years ago, a Webster University student wrote a thesis on how to assist needy residents in Webster Groves and Rock Hill. The result of that effort, Webster-Rock Hill Ministries (W-RHM), will celebrate its 25th anniversary on Aug. 26.

"I think they do a tremendous job," said Sue Vigen, a member of the W-RHM Action Council. "They just do so much."

Through donations, fundraisers, and the support of 29 local congregations, today, the non-profit agency serves about 125 families a month, according to Executive Director Mike Bohannon. It has an active roll of about 300 families.

"We've been operating on faith since our inception," Bohannon said. "We keep reminding ourselves to continue to operate on faith and work like heck behind the scenes to make it work also."

Bohannon cites one reason for the agency's success is because it's a local, grassroots effort.

"Being local makes us tangible," Bohannon said.

W-RHM attempts to give its clients a "hand up" by helping them to become more self-sufficient, Vigen noted.

"We help the unemployed, single-parent situations, lots of grandparents raising grandchildren — even great-grandparents raising great-grandchildren," said Bohannon. "We have the elderly, of course. We can't leave them out. They tend to get hidden.

Since March 1992, W-RHM has been serving its clients from its facility at 111 E. Waymire in North Webster. As part of 125th anniversary celebrations, First Baptist Church of Webster Groves, First Congregational Church of Webster Groves and Webster Groves Presbyterian Church provided 66 percent of the funding to construct the facility. The balance of the funds came from other member churches, individuals, businesses and organizations.

Programs/Services

The programs and services offered by W-RHM are many and varied.

"Food is key, as well as hygiene bags — toiletry items which can't be obtained with food stamps," Bohannon explained. "Utility assistance is a high need as is laundry detergent.

"We have a volunteer attorney, which is a key element for folks with any kind of legal situation," he noted.

Programs include its anchor, Adopt a Family at Christmas.

"We just finished our summer day camp for kids," Bohannon said. "We had 39 kids — a little low compared to other camps we've had.

"We'll be revamping it for next year. It's too important a program for kids and their parents to not have it."

With school about to start, the agency is putting together backpacks for needy students, thanks to donations by the Old Newsboys program.

A Retiring Executive Director

Bohannon has been executive director for eight years. A former volunteer, when the position became open in 1999, he asked to be considered for it. In November, he plans to retire.

"It's nice to be passionate about something, but I'm ready to pass it on," Bohannon said about leaving. However, after a new director has transitioned into the position, Bohannon hopes to volunteer at the agency again.

"He will be hard to replace," Vigen said. "We wish he would go on forever."

Bohannon is the only paid person on staff. About 25 volunteers help man the office.

"We need volunteers that would be willing to give up their time to help with projects and things we have," noted Phillips.

Celebrating 25 Years

Bohannon will be on hand when W-RHM holds its anniversary celebration on Sunday, Aug. 26, at 2 p.m., at 111 E. Waymire. The keynote speaker will be Penny Holste, minister at Christ Lutheran Church.

Vigen said she is hoping W-RHM's first director, Rose Walls, who served from September 1983 to 1995, will be able to attend. Webster Groves Mayor Gerry Welch, Rock Hill Mayor Julie Morgan and Shrewsbury Mayor Bert Gates are also expected to be on hand. Other dignitaries who have been invited include State Sen. Mike Gibbons, Rep. Kathlyn Fares and St. Louis County Council Member Barbara Fraser.

"We have families who have temporary bumps in the road. We can help carry them until they can get stable again," Bohannon added.

Longtime volunteer and action council member Thelma Phillips said next month, W-RHM will be inundated with clients who need help with their utility bills, because of this month's heat wave.

As action council members, Phillips and Vigen are delegates from one of the 29 sponsor churches — Phillips from First Baptist Church of Webster Groves and Vigen from Glendale Presbyterian Church.

Whether its Old Newsboys, the Girl Scouts April Showers or Boy Scouts Scouting for Food, or other organizations, Bohannon can count on the community to help.

As an example, Bohannon said if he's running short of food, all he has to do is call area schools. They hold food drives and within weeks, he is inundated with canned goods.

Bohannon is happy when he's able to help his clients and make a difference in their lives. One such client is a single mother with four daughters who has been selected to receive a Habitat For Humanity house.

"That's one of the neatest things for us to see," Bohannon said. "She's able to become independent and to get out of the trap of rent."

The public is also invited. Refreshments will be served and the building and grounds will be on display.



Mike Bohannon, left, executive director of Webster-Rock Hill Ministries, helps cut branches in North Webster with Jenna Harrison from Appleton, Wisc. Harrison was part of Catholic Heart Charities, which spent a week in St. Louis fixing up houses for W-RHM's families. photo by Diana Linsley