

Your home. Your local news.

Naperville Sun

Five questions with CARES' Janet Derrick

Naperville CARES executive director

March 23, 2009

By **LOUISE BRASS** lbrass@scn1.com

The going can get tough for people who have no job, no means of transportation, or no food in their pantry. That's when Janet Derrick and the volunteers at Naperville CARES step up to the plate.

"When you turn someone's water on and they are so grateful and you know you keep somebody housed, they are so grateful," Derrick said.

Top Five

Favorite movie: "In Her Shoes"
Favorite TV show: "Bones"
Favorite restaurant: All restaurants participating in the "Cuisine for a Cause" benefit on April 25 at Tellabs
Favorite performer: U2
Favorite city: Washington, D.C.

FYI

Naperville CARES sees clients by appointment.

Call 630-369-0200, fax 630-369-1336 or visit www.napervillecares.org.

To reach Janet Derrick, send an e-mail to jderrick@napervillecares.org.



Executive Director of Naperville CARES Janet Derrick, left, discusses a client with volunteer Margie Tarp.
(Danielle Gardner/Staff Photographer)

However, the organization depends solely on donations, mostly from local churches, and the need keeps growing.

"It's usually families that are involved, so you are keeping them housed and their children in their schools," Derrick said, and that's the reward for her.

Derrick began volunteering with Naperville CARES (Community Acting in Response to Economic Stress) several years ago.

Her dedication to the less-fortunate in the community eventually placed her in the right spot to be named executive director. She took over the position in January.

"We have a great organization. But we would not be here today without our volunteers," Derrick said.

Now more than ever, the need for help on so many levels is evident, as the economy slows and job losses continue to increase throughout DuPage and Will counties.

Derrick is seeing a change in the type of clients seeking help. They now include people one would not think would need assistance, she said. In the past, people who held mortgages generally didn't need to seek help, but that is changing, she said.

"The food pantries' client numbers are up dramatically. I think they are up 50 percent. We are up 25 percent this year in requests for help. We are seeing more people with mortgages coming to us. That's new to us," she said.

"We do our best to get the clients the resources they need. Sometimes they are not eligible for unemployment. What we try to do at that point is a case-by-case analysis. But we always supply resources," Derrick said.

"I have a lot of hope things will turn around and that we will get more donors. We do have a generous community with donors that help support our mission. The problem is I'm always looking for money or new volunteers, so I am sometimes afraid when people see me they are going to run the other way," Derrick said, with a laugh.

Derrick sees many people with serious difficulties, but she always has a cheerful disposition, and she greets people with words of hope and encouragement in the small, upper-level office complex on West Fifth Avenue.

When Naperville CARES was founded in 1998, its digs were even smaller and austere.

"We were in the Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry next to the freezer," said Derrick. "We had one file cabinet and two little desks. Then we had lateral file cabinets filled with files, and so I did a lot of different work.

"I worked on programs, then I joined the board, and I worked on their resources committee, which helps direct the funds and helps direct people to the resources and helps direct how we are going to spend the funds," Derrick said.

To be eligible for assistance, individuals or families must be Naperville residents, or members of a Naperville church congregation, or receive referrals from the staff of a Naperville congregation.

"It's a very effective program. Knowing that you are trying to make a little bit of a difference is always a positive," Derrick said.

1. Do you solve all your clients' problems? No. We don't have a lot to give financially. But we have a pretty good sense of other sources out there. We do try to get them connected with other sources. If we hit a wall, we try to find new places to refer them to, or find someone to help them.

2. What do you do to keep potential donors from running the other way when they see you coming?

We as an organization need to do a better job of communicating what we do for the community. When you have a client that has gotten some financial assistance, 95 percent of them are saying they had a positive outcome. When they get a car (donated to them from the organization), 100 percent say they had a positive outcome. That means it's a very effective program.

3. Why did you originally get involved? My interest actually started while I was still working at the time, and my church, St. Thomas Catholic Church, started with an organization called St. Vincent DePaul Society. This organization goes into people's homes and prays with them and tries to help them. In November of 2000, I got involved. My grandfather did that work back in New York City in the 1950s. He got the Very Distinguished Award from the St. Vincent DePaul Society. So I felt, even though my children were still very young, I could do this in whatever spare time I had.

In April 2001, I left the corporate world to spend more time with my children, but I was still doing the St. Vincent DePaul work. Then I went to a luncheon with Naperville CARES and started working here in January 2002 as a volunteer.

4. What is it that makes people donate to this cause? I think it serves a need. I think there are no organizations like us in Naperville, but I think a lot of other communities do this piecemeal. A lot of the churches do things like this.

What CARES is able to do is kind of help coordinate some of that help. Churches still do kind of their own thing. We are the central point. But whenever they kind of hit a snag, they come to us. They are coming to us more and more, and it is kind of a sharing of resources.

5. Will you be working with the federal government on mortgage assistance options?

We are trying to work with different funds. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has money that will be coming and relatively soon, and DuPage County is getting money. I've been in touch with the head of DuPage County food services and also Judy Biggert's office, trying to track down what are the restrictions on the money. We can't refer our clients if some restrictions won't help our clients. We are currently trying to track the funding.