A Newsletter of Metro Social Services

Issue 1

Summer/Fall 2007

THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

At the publication of this newsletter, Metro Social Services (MSS) has just received notification from the Council on Accreditation (COA) of its accreditation. MSS is one of three family service agencies in the Nashville area to achieve this recognition. Additionally, MSS is the first public family service agency in the state of Tennessee to be accredited by COA. At long last, a review by recognized experts in the field of social services confirms our adherence to best practice. None of this would have happened without our partners, stakeholders as well as the committed and resilient staff that this Department has been able to attract and retain for many years.

As we enter a new phase with leadership and guidance from a new Mayor and Council, the challenge of serving the most vulnerable with ever decreasing resources continues. Now more than ever, we must create new partnerships and leverage existing and evolving ones to provide support to the most vulnerable citizens of Metro/Nashville Davidson County. During the past year we have seen a growing homeless population particularly among families and children, an increasing gap between rich and poor, continuing food instability among low-income workers, and challenging circumstances for seniors and minimum wage workers struggling to make ends meet. Relative caregivers most of whom are grandparents play multiple roles in the lives of their grandchildren including but not limited to surrogate parent and unregulated childcare provider. While providing nurturing childcare, these providers are not equipped to prepare children for school.

Gerri Robinson, Executive Director

These are among the many challenges facing the most vulnerable. I thank our partner organizations and look forward to continuing these relationships and developing new ones. Finally, please go online and complete a short survey to provide feedback on this and future newsletters.

Thank you for all that you do.

The best number to call to find out about services available through MSS and elsewhere in the Nashville community is (615) 862-6458.

Contact Numbers of Metro Social Services

Administrative Offices
(615) 862-6400

Adult and Family Support Services
(615) 862-6432

Information and Referral
(615) 862-6458

Brief Counseling
(615) 862-6432

Adult Homemaker Services
(615) 862-6480

Senior Nutrition Services
(615) 880-2292

Burial Assistance
615) 862-6458

Relative Caregiver Assistance
(615) 862-6432

Homeless Services
(615) 880-2526

Planning and Coordination
(615) 862-6419

Website: http://www.nashville.gov/sservices

MSS Accreditation

MSS RECEIVES FULL ACCREDITATION

Metro Social Services received its accreditation from the Council on Accreditation on July 23.

"I am extremely pleased to notify you that Metropolitan Social Services has been accredited by the Council on Accreditation (COA)," wrote Brenda Williams-Gray, director of COA's Accreditation Commission.

"COA's program of quality improvement is designed to identify providers that have set high performance standards for themselves and have made a commitment to their constituents to deliver the very best quality services," the letter further stated.

COA is an international, nonprofit, child and family service and behavioral healthcare accrediting organization.

Metro Social Services is only the third Nashville family services organization to be fully accredited by the COA. COA accredited organizations have measures in place to:

- Evaluate personnel performance and ensure employee qualifications,
- Identify problem areas and make necessary changes and improvements; and
- Plan for adverse situations and manage risk.

The other two Nashville organizations accredited are Family and Children's Service and the Mid-Cumberland Community Service Agency.

Gerri Robinson, executive director of Metro Social Services, said the year-long process involved intense scrutiny of all aspects of the department.

"It is a very thorough process, in which COA officials examine everything from management to effective delivery of services to staff training," Robinson said. "I want to thank my staff for its commitment to high quality services. Without the high professionalism of our employees, we would not have achieved this honor."

Customer Satisfaction

"The purpose of our customer satisfaction surveys is to bring the voice of the customer into our agency."

- Michelle Davis, Quality Management coordinator.

Implementing customer satisfactory surveys on a regular basis has helped Metro Social Services identify and correct issues and find new ways to deliver services.

In one specific example, Quality Management Coordinator Michelle Davis said, surveys showed that customers of the Nutrition program were not satisfied with the portion size and labeling of the food.

"As a result we met with the vendor to increase portion size and better label the food for our elderly customers," Davis said.

Surveys are distributed by frontline staff who hand one to each customer they see. Completed surveys are then collected every month and implemented in a streamlined reporting process.

Davis said the continuous and data-rich feedback impacts the department's performance, which results in improved customer satisfaction.

"The purpose of our customer satisfaction surveys is to bring the voice of the customer into our agency," Davis said. "We use the information received from the surveys to identify gaps in services and processes."

For customers in the Homemaker and Nutrition program, which offers off-site services, satisfaction surveys are conducted every six month.

In the Homemaker program, a neutral person (usually a program supervisor) picks surveys up at the customers' homes.

In the Nutrition program, surveys are collected at each congregate site (Senior High-Rise Towers or community centers) and via telephone for homebound customers.

"We use customer feedback to influence our internal change," Davis said. "The results of the surveys allow our frontline staff to self-correct and continuously improve performance based on what the customers are telling them rather than relying on 'interpretations' of how they think their customers felt."

Social Services Plan

The Planning and Coordination Unit is in the final stages of developing an initial Social Services Plan that identifies the needs and gaps in assisting the poor in Davidson County.

The plan, which will be entitled "Strengthening Davidson County's Low-Income Residents and Families," concentrates on three areas:

- Adults & Seniors;
- Children & Youth; and
- Immigrants.

Dinah Gregory, director of Planning and Coordination, who leads the effort, said besides identifying gaps, the plan also projects increases in need. One example would be preparing for the Baby Boom population.

"Because of the Baby Boom population, there is going to be a huge increase in the number of seniors over the next several years, and agencies need to prepare to provide services to them," Gregory said. "Without additional resources and without factoring that into the plan, that's going to be very difficult."

The Social Services Plan also addresses systems development; in other words, it examines the importance of identifying available services, where they are and what their capacity is.

"Part of the problem is that people just don't know what's going on in the community," Gregory said. "There are hundreds of organizations and it's difficult to keep up with who is doing what."

Before actually writing the plan, the Planning and Coordination Unit collected data and information to identify trends and gaps in existing services.

At a roundtable scheduled for August, the Planning and Coordination Unit will solicit additional input from community agencies to strengthen essential cooperation before finalizing the plan.

"At the end of the event, we will form work groups to work on each of the topics," Gregory said. "We can't just create a plan and that plan will be the Plan forever. Even the Constitution had to be amended. This will be an ongoing process as the environment changes in the community, as resources available change."

Gregory said the Social Services Plan will have to be updated regularly to ensure its accuracy.

The Social Services Plan will be structured in the following way:

It focuses on five specific areas, which relate to the most vulnerable populations in Nashville. Those five areas are:

- Housing;
- Access to Services (such as health care, transportation, supportive care, mental health, public benefits, and safety);
- Education (consumer and community education);
- Workforce development; and
- Systems coordination (data collection, provider coordination, network building).

Each of these areas will be applied to the three population groups - Adults & Seniors, Children & Youth, Immigrants – the plan's target populations.

Furthermore, the plan will identify a vision, goals, resources and community partners, action steps and results (short term and long term) for each of the five focus areas.

Gregory said the plan is similar to the strategic plan to end chronic homelessness in Nashville, which called for the creation of the current Homelessness Commission.

NEXT STEPS:

What: Roundtable with Stakeholders
When: Aug. 16, 2007
Where: Downtown Library
Who: Community stakeholders, social services organizations

For more information: Call 862-6494.

Homeless Services Unit

Especially in homelessness prevention, the number of families seeking help has increased tremendously in the past few years.

PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED IF THEY KNEW HOW MANY HOMELESS AND INDIVIDUALS AT THE BRINK OF HOMELESSNESS ARE EMPLOYED.

- Giovanni Achoe, Homeless Services program manager.

During the past two years, Metro Social Services was able to place 382 homeless individuals into permanent housing.

Last year alone 214 homeless people moved into permanent housing, according to Giovanni Achoe, who is the program manager of the Homeless Services Unit (part of Adult and Family Support Services).

The unit is in its third year of existence and last fiscal year has served at least 1,321 individuals who were homeless or faced becoming homeless. The 1,321 number stems from Metro's HMIS database.

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which in Nashville is called NASH, is a database that helps collect valuable information about local homeless populations.

However, Achoe said the 1,321 number is an absolute minimum because not everybody who comes to inquire about services wishes to be registered.

Unlike the Mayor's Homelessness Commission, which focuses on chronically homeless persons based on the HUD definition, the Homeless Services Unit helps every individual threatened by homelessness.

"The Homelessness Commission was designed to serve the chronic population, we are serving all," Achoe said. "A majority of our customers are African American men, and we see a lot of individuals who are between 40 and 60 years old."

Customers also include elderly, youth, chronically homeless, veterans, and families.

Especially in homelessness prevention, the number of families seeking help has increased tremendously in the past few years.

Achoe said her unit provides assessment on a case-by-case basis. When dealing with homelessness, every person deals with a unique situation.

After assessment, one of the five social workers will help the customer to develop an individualized plan to address the person's needs.
Other services the unit offers include:
- Following up after initial assessment and plan development;
- Referring services to other resources within the community (nonprofit organizations, churches, landlords, MDHA, Health Department, mental health agencies);
- Helping with transportation needs (bus tickets); and
- Brief counseling (to create a budget, to help with job skills evaluation, to determine social security eligibility, etc.)

"This agency is the agency of last resort," Achoe said. "And I think that's what makes us really unique."

The program depends on the successful cooperation and partnership with other organizations that offer financial assistance, mental health treatment, clothes, transportation, furniture, medical services, food, etc.

"We could not survive without our community partners," Achoe said and added that the working collaboration prevents duplication of services.

One partnership that has flourished in the past 18 month is with *Roof Top* – a consortium of local churches that pool together funding to help assist MSS customers.

The Homeless Services Unit is able to screen individuals and refer them to *Roof Top*, which then decides on assistance.

"Not everything is about financial assistance," Achoe said, adding that some people need help tutoring their children who are in Metro schools, others have transportation needs or need counseling to work through family issues.

During the past 14 months alone, the Homeless Services Unit together with *Roof Top* have helped 564 individuals to maintain housing.

Summer Camp Vouchers

More than 1,100 eligible children participated in the MSS Summer Camp 2007 Voucher Program, which provided $600 per child for eligible families.

To qualify, families of school-age children had to fall under the national poverty guidelines and live in the 10 Davidson County zip codes with the highest poverty rates, said Tarver Smith, program manager of the Adult and Family Support Unit.

"Parents were responsible to make the camp selection," Smith said, adding MSS held a Parent Open House on Feb. 15, where participating families could get information about the voucher program.

Families were able to choose between day camps, half-day camps and weeklong camps. "We got the word out through Family Resource Centers that are located in the 10 targeted Council Districts," Smith said. "We also had a Website with camp selections available, and for parents without online access, we had a printed handout."

Voucher enrollment was March 12-23.

"We emphasized that we wanted relative caregivers to participate," Smith said. "And we made provisions for special needs children."

One mother of a hearing impaired child told Smith that her kid could hardly wait to get up every morning and go to camp. It was hard for the child when camp was over.

"The mother told me that her child did not have much chances for social experiences like that and being able to go to camp opened up a whole new world for the kid," Smith said. "Another mother told me how grateful she was that she actually had a choice in selecting the camp."

MSS carefully partnered with camps that offered experiences inner city children would not easily have in their neighborhoods. The camp programs available through the voucher program were educational in nature.

Children and their parents could choose between 61 approved camps. Programs varied from nature & adventure to arts & crafts.

FAMILIES WERE ABLE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN 61 CAMP PROGRAMS, WHICH WERE EDUCATIONAL AND CREATIVE.

Volunteer Day

Volunteers for the Senior Nutrition program enjoyed their Annual Appreciation Day at a Sounds game on May 30.

About 150 of the 200 volunteers participated in the event, which included a cookout at the game.

Julius Witherspoon, Senior Nutrition program director, said volunteers come from all walks of life and work between two and 20 hours a week.

"Without them it would be difficult for us to provide our nutrition services to seniors," Witherspoon said. "They are a vital part of the program."

Metro Social Services serves1,300-1,400 meals per day, about 700 of those are delivered to homebound seniors.

"Some receive one meal per day, others receive five meals a week, depending on the individual's needs and situation," Witherspoon said.

Volunteers are recruited through congregations, by word of mouth or through neighbors who are involved in the program. They receive one day of training where they learn about program policies and procedures, safety, food handling, and what to expect when dealing with the seniors enrolled in the Nutrition Program.

The food is prepared by a contractor and delivered to several distribution points such as Senior High-Rise Towers and community centers throughout Davidson County. Volunteers pick up the meals from a distribution center and deliver it in person to the seniors.

"The Senior Nutrition program depends on volunteers that help us distribute daily meals to seniors all over Davidson County."

- MSS Executive Director Gerri Robinson.

Children's Book Project

One small idea that started in the waiting room of MSS' Intake and Assessment Unit has meanwhile spread through the entire department.

That program is called the Children's Book Project.

Through *Book'em & Reading Is Fundamental* sponsored by the Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt, MSS provides age appropriate literature to children of customers, according to Brenda Venson, program manager of MSS' Intake and Assessment Unit.

"It started during Fiscal Year 05/06," Venson said. "We had children waiting with their parents to be seen by a caseworker."

Many donated children's books at MSS contain Spanish and English texts to encourage interest in foreign lanugages.

The idea to provide these children with books came from Program Coordinator Luz Belleza-Binns, who works in the Intake and Assessment Unit. She was able to make arrangements for the availability of books so that we could promote a small literacy program.

"The original idea was to provide books for children to read and/or their parents to read to them," Venson said. "Each of these donated books contained a Spanish version and an English version."

The goal of the program is to increase proficiency in reading, to help Hispanic children learn English and for English-speakers to get interested in a foreign language.

When other units within MSS learned about the program, their interest peaked and they wanted to become part of the Children's Book Project.

"We now have books available to any child coming to MSS," Venson said, adding the department also gives away coloring books and crayons.

The sponsorship provided by the community resource is just one example of the many partnerships MSS enters to help its customers. Being able to refer customers to resources within the community to address their needs is key for the new Social Services structure.

"We rely on our community partners to assist our customers," Venson said. "In doing so, we inform our customers that we cannot guarantee that their needs can be met since money resources are very scarce in the community."

However, Venson said, her unit guarantees customers to help them "navigate" successfully through available community resources.

The Intake and Assessment Unit handled 501 contacts (walk-ins or by phone) from customers in June alone.

While direct services are provided through referral, the MSS Intake and Assessment Unit differs significantly from other referral units such as United Way's 2-1-1.

"It's an important service to the community and when calling 2-1-1, you can get connected to community services from anywhere within the 615 area code," Venson explained. "When calling the MSS Intake and Assessment Unit, you not only are given information to connect you to community services, but using best practice guidelines by trained personnel, you are also able to meet with trained caseworkers who help you explore your situation and determine how and what led you to need assistance.

"Using their skills, the caseworkers work with you to try and reduce or alleviate your need for continued assistance through community services.

"We do case notes, establish service plans, make home visits and provide phone information," Venson said. "We are equipped to link you to a variety of resources and coordinate services you receive."

Homelessness Commission Move

The Mayor's Homelessness Commission will move from Metro Social Services to MDHA this fall.

The move was decided because the heavy concentration to create new housing for chronically homeless people makes MDHA a better fit for the implementation of its 10-year plan. In addition, MDHA's semi-private status enhances the process to secure private funding.

Homelessness Coordinator Clifton Harris said in the two years since the commission was formed, 26 housing units have been established under the commission's Housing First policy.
Housing First means that any homeless person regardless of prior drug or criminal history is allowed to enter into a contract. Most low-income housing units in Nashville do not permit individuals who:
a) Are on the sexual registry;
b) Have sold or manufactured meth on federal property; and
c) Have committed arson.

"Housing First is essential to saving lives and reducing the cost of homelessness," Harris said.
In addition to housing, more than 36 chronically homeless individuals have received wrap-around services. This has resulted in an estimated cost savings of $152,478 in the following areas:
- Avoided ER visits;
- Avoided inpatient hospital stays;
- Avoided incarceration; and
- Contributed volunteer services and donations.

There is still a need to calculate additional areas of cost savings such as placing a value on "days off the street." A local research project is currently underway to figure out how much the city saves by placing the chronically homeless in housing.

The Homelessness Commission contracts with Eckman/Freeman to provide the wrap-around services, which entail teaching people every life skill necessary to keep them in housing.
Such life skills, according to Tonya Cain with Eckman/Freeman, include among other things:
- Coordinating and assuring that individuals receive medical care;
- Teaching them how to clean and maintain their apartments;
- Helping them gain job readiness skills;
- Assisting them with receiving Social Security Disability money;
- Getting them into employment if possible;
- Providing financial education;
- Arranging transportation to jobs and medical service providers; and
- Answering crisis calls at all times of the day.

In another program, Park Center, a nonprofit agency for adults with mental illness has been able to help more than 51 chronically homeless individuals to receive federal SSI or SSDI benefits.

"With these benefits, recovery from homelessness is more attainable, as these beneficiaries now receive a stable monthly income and health insurance (Medicaid or Medicare)," wrote Will Connelly with Park Center in the commission's newsletter.
The housing status of the individuals who received SSI/SSDI benefits through Park Center are as follows:
- 30 clients have obtained transitional or permanent housing;
- 20 have applied for permanent/transitional housing and are waiting (They encountered obstacles like documentation, wait lists, background checks, drug tests, etc.); and
- One person received housing and died with dignity.

"Moving forward it's time to expand our pilot projects and increase our housing activity and our wrap-around service activity," Harris said. "In addition, it's time to implement a pilot project in employment and homelessness prevention."

"Housing First and employment fast reduce the number of chronically homeless on the streets of Nashville."

- Clifton Harris, Metro's Homelessness Coordinator

NEXT STEPS:

Expand current pilot projects.

Implement a new pilot project with focus on employment and homelessness prevention.

A Newsletter of Metro Social Services

IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER

MSS Board Meeting
Every 4th Wednesday of the Month 3:00 p.m.
METRO SOUTHEAST
1417 Murfreesboro Pike
Nashville, TN 37217

READ ABOUT US ON THE WEB!!

http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/index.htm

Metro Social Services
532 Mainstream Drive
Suite A
Nashville, TN 37228
(615) 862-6400

INFORMAL CHILDCARE ROUNDTABLE

With less than 33% of Davidson County's disadvantaged children who entered kindergarten in 2004 having mastered all the necessary language and literacy skills, Metro Social Services determined to reach out to the area's informal childcare providers.

To start the community effort, Metro Social Services, under the leadership of Executive Director Gerri Robinson, hosted a roundtable on Informal Childcare at the Nashville Public Library on June 29.

"Children are the number one resource of every community," Robinson said. "Therefore, we need to do our best to prepare them for school and help them succeed in life. We especially need to target low-income parents because we know that students in low-income areas face harder challenges than the rest.

In 2006, according to Metro Nashville Public Schools data, the overall graduation rate in Nashville was 67%. Maplewood and Stratford high schools, which educate the lowest income children, had graduation rates this year of 43% and 55% respectively.

"Increasing graduation rates in Nashville starts in early childhood," Robinson said.

After the June roundtable, a group of community stakeholders representing government, nonprofit and for-profit sectors, formed an ad hoc committee and developed a proposal requesting seed money from Tennessee's Secretary of State office.

With that seed money, the ad hoc group, which hopes to transform into an informal childcare coalition, plans to create an infrastructure to reach out to informal childcare providers and low-income parents utilizing unregulated caregivers.

In addition to creating an outreach model, the group wants to start implementing support measures to help improve quality of informal care for children under 6 years of age.

"The need to reach out to low-income parents who use informal childcare is extensive," Robinson said. "And we know that informal caregivers are interested in receiving services."

According to 2005 U.S. Census data, more than 47,700 Davidson County families have children under 6. In 29,875 of these families, all parents were working. Approximately 35% of children under the age of 6 are cared for by a family member, friend, or neighbor.

Metro Social Services has developed surveys to collect information from parents and informal caregivers and will first implement those surveys at the Mayor's First Day Celebration on Aug. 12.

A few more facts:

- In Davidson County, 64% of students in the public school system are economically disadvantaged, according to the Tennessee Department of Education.

- The average cost of childcare in Davidson County in June 2002 was $678 per month ($739 if adjusted for inflation) according to Students for a Living Wage, an organization based at Vanderbilt University.

- Recent cost-benefit analyses, according to the High Scope Educational Research Foundation, found that quality early learning experiences result in $4-$17 savings to the public for every dollar spent. Of the public return, 88% is from savings due to reduced crime rates, 4% from education savings, 7% from increased taxes due to higher earnings, and 1% from welfare savings.