

Despite tough times, CRT still helping families

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MIDDLETOWN — After 40 years of helping people and families become self-sufficient while meeting their basic human needs, the Community Renewal Team is going as strong as ever.

Todd Francini, Director for Middlesex Services for CRT, said the non-profit organization is now helping more clients than ever. CRT is the largest non-profit in the state, doing everything from preparing and delivering meals to the elderly, and helping struggling mothers find housing and jobs.

CRT also provides energy assistance to low-income households, provides eviction prevention and holds nutrition classes to help parents improve the diet of their children.

"This is a tremendously exciting time for CRT. We have a number of highly successful programs. We also have a tremendous staff, who love what they do," said Francini.

Francini noted that programs

like Head Start, Meals on Wheels, alternatives to incarceration, supportive housing and shelter, and many others give people the skills and resources to become self-sufficient and to thrive.

When America's War on Poverty began in 1963, the founders of CRT were already addressing the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in Hartford, he said.

In 1999, the Community Renewal Team of Greater Hartford Inc. merged with Community Action for Greater Middlesex County to form the Community Renewal Team Inc. for both Middlesex and Hartford Counties.

CRT now runs major programs in 59 Connecticut towns, including Meals on Wheels, Head Start, home-buyer and energy assistance, and nutrition and youth services.

"People tend to focus on the fact that we are the largest non-profit in the state, but to us that means nothing. It is not a competition. It is about helping

people," Francini said modestly.

The bad economy has taken its toll on some CRT programs, Francini said. CRT is funded through state and federal grants. In recent years, the levels of funding have essentially evened out, instead of increasing.

Cuts in funding have forced the elimination of some employment training programs. To compensate, clients were instead shifted to other programs, like the One Stop job bank, which teaches them how to search for jobs on the Internet, write effective resumes and manage the interview process.

Funding for other programs has been cut by as much as 10 percent, forcing CRT officials to become more "creative" by applying for other grant opportunities.

"It is unfortunate that we have had to make some changes. The number of people interested seemed to support that the programs continue, if not expand. We were, however, to do some things that we feel maintains our level of services."

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In this age of state budget deficits and a sagging economy, Francini said that CRT is content to make the most of the funding it receives.

"In this day and age, we view level funding as a good thing, because it means we were spared being cut. When times are tough, there is even more of a need. People are losing their jobs. People cannot afford to remain in their homes," said Francini said.

Francini pointed out that many CRT programs, like the Vocational Development Program, would provide value for clients throughout their lifetime because they teach skills that will people and families to eventually become self-sufficient.

"We want to show (clients) how to take control of their lives and make positive decisions. So people will have the tools to make improvements in their lives when times are good and bad," he said.

Other programs, like the Energy Assistance and Meals on Wheels programs, target people

and families in the most need. And in the current economy, there are more people in need than ever, Francini said.

Perhaps CRT's most successful programs are those that teach mothers and fathers to become better parents.

The Head Start program, for instance, helps lay the foundation for healthy and productive lives, preparing 3 and 4 year olds for kindergarten, according to Evett Cartagena, the head of Social Services for CRT's Early Care and Education.

"The majority of the parents that we help are single moms that have their hands full. We try to work on their strengths and set goals. The goal is to help them become better parents," said Cartagena.

Earlier this month, CRT sponsored an event aimed specifically at fathers. As part of their Father Initiative, CRT united 39 fathers with their children to spend a day at Mystic Aquarium.

"It was so exciting to see all the dads together... just to watch the faces of all of the children

being able to spend a day together with their fathers. Unfortunately, some of the dads didn't even live with their children, so it was wonderful for both the children and the dads to spend a day together," Cartagena.

Cartagena proudly noted that the Head Start program is full of success stories. Many of the people who work in the Head Start programs were initially enrolled in Early Care and Education programs.

"Programs like Head Start provide just that to young mothers, a head start. It's a way to stay ahead of life's challenges for both the children and the moms. It allows moms to do things like go back to school and get good jobs," Cartagena said.

"I was a head start mom, and they encouraged me to go get my Bachelors. That's what this program does, it lets moms know they have choices," she added.

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