

Derrick named first executive director of Naperville CARES

By Susan Dibble | Daily Herald Staff

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Janet Derrick, the new executive director of Naperville CARES, is on a mission to make people more aware of what the organization does to help Naperville residents avoid homelessness and what they can do to help.

"I'm worried about being from such a great community and still seeing people who are falling through the cracks," said Derrick, who began her new position last week. "I think if we can better communicate what we do, I have faith in the community that they will rise to the occasion."



Janet Derrick is the first executive director of Naperville CARES after seven years as a volunteer.

Derrick, a Naperville resident for nearly 11 years, has been rising to the occasion since joining Naperville CARES as a volunteer in 2002. She became a board member two years later and has served in nearly every capacity, including most recently as vice president.

So when it came time for the organization, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, to hire its first executive director, Derrick was the natural choice, said Tom Cordaro, president of CARES.

"We're really excited. We have a wonderful director in Janet," Cordaro said. "She's committed to this work."

Derrick said CARES just kind of pulled her in. After she left a job in the corporate world to spend more time with her family, she was looking for a way to contribute to the community. Remembering how her grandfather had worked with the St. Vincent de Paul Catholic charity, Derrick started there and then learned about Naperville CARES.

"I heard about CARES and said I need to get involved," she said. "I just feel it's important work to do."

CARES, or Community Acting in Response to Economic Stress, was started by Naperville congregations in 1999 in response to a nine-month study of the needs and social service resources in the community. When Derrick joined, CARES was housed in Naperville's Loaves & Fishes Community Pantry, next to the freezer, she said.

CARES now has its own quarters at 618B W. 5th Ave., Naperville, and receives support from the city, civic organizations, individuals and churches, but its mission remains the same - to help people in the Naperville community avoid homelessness and attain self-sufficiency.

Affluent as Naperville seems, about 3 percent of its population or 4,600 families live below the federal poverty level, Derrick said. Many are single moms.

In the current economic downturn, CARES also is seeing more people who might not ordinarily seek its help.



Derrick, left, chats with volunteer Renee Larson, one of 40 people who help out at Naperville CARES.

"The worry is people who have skills are not finding jobs right now," Derrick said.

Doing what it can to help people stay afloat, CARES provides one-time emergency assistance to cover rent, utilities or a car payment.

"Anything that is going to keep people housed and in work," Derrick said.

CARES also accepts donated cars, makes repairs to those that are fixable and gives them to those who need transportation. Over its 10 years, it has received nearly 1,000 cars and given away 450, Derrick said.

Residents who can afford an apartment but do not have money for a security deposit can receive help through CARES' rent deposit program funded by community development block grants, she said.

Last fiscal year, CARES received 948 requests for help from Naperville residents or members of Naperville congregations. It distributed \$160,000 in funds, and worked with churches to put together an additional \$60,000 that went toward rent and utilities. During the first five months of this fiscal year, requests are up 25 percent, Derrick said.

The increase began during the summer when the federal and state Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program shut down during the warm weather months. The economic downturn soon followed.

"It was a very busy summer for us and then September hit," Derrick said.

Derrick - who is charged with finding new funding sources for CARES - knows she faces a challenge because businesses that traditionally have been supportive are facing their own economic tough times. Improving communication with donors to let them know how their funds are spent is among her primary goals, she said.

As a volunteer, Derrick helped generate more than \$20,000 in sponsorships for CARES' Cuisine with a Cause 2007 and 2008 fundraisers. This year's fundraiser is April 25 at Tellabs.

Derrick also oversees the work of CARES' day-to-day operations and 40 volunteers, with the only other employee being a part-time office manager.

Married with a son at Stanford University and another a high school freshman, Derrick said her other community activity has been through the schools. Through her sons, she became involved Neuqua Valley High School's cross-country and track program and the Neuqua Boosters.

Derrick said her work with CARES addresses in a small way the larger divide in society in which all children do not have the same opportunities.

"If we could keep people housed in Naperville with their kids and their kids could stay in these school districts, I just think they have a better shot at going forward," she said. "It's incumbent on us all to do what we can for our communities."

For details on Naperville CARES, call (630) 369-0200.

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