

Reuniting families



Advocate staff photo by LIBBY ISENHOWER -- Eileen Stradley, left, speaks with Barbara Thompson about the Safe Families for Children program Sunday afternoon after mass at St. Jean Vianey Catholic Church.

Parents in crisis have ‘safe’ place to turn

[By Amy Wold](#)

Advocate staff writer

Imagine a single mother who has to go to the hospital or to jail. Who watches her children? Many people have family or friends who can care for their children in times of emergency, but some families in crisis have no one to turn for help.

That’s a problem being addressed by Safe Families for Children, a new program started through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

The program originated in Chicago in 2002 to connect families in crisis with families that could help.

“Families in crisis, but they haven’t mistreated their children,” said Barbara Thompson, licensed clinical social worker and coordinator of Safe Families for Children for Catholic Charities.

The Safe Families for Children program connects the family in crisis with a host family, which agrees to care for the child and help the family until the parent and children can be reunited.

Not all volunteers will be hosting children, Thompson explained. There's also a need for volunteers like mechanics who can repair a family's car or someone with financial expertise who can help a family put together a budget, she said.

"We're not looking for money. We're looking for time, commitment and talent," Thompson said.

"I think our community and its children can benefit from this significantly," said the Rev. Jerry Martin, of St. Patrick Catholic Church. Martin said he attended a presentation about the program last fall and the results claimed by the national program were "staggering."

Information from the national Safe Families for Children program shows that 83 percent of the children helped ended up reuniting with their parents.

"If you start with the children, I think you can make a big impact on the world," said Janet Harkness, one of the community volunteers helping organize the effort at St. Jean Vianney Catholic Church.

Not only are they working to get people to volunteer to be a "safe family," but there are also roles for people to assist a host family or to set up a resource closet with items such as highchairs, cribs, diapers, formula or other things host families might need, she said.

"People look at it as a way of living out their faith," Harkness said. "People respond. It's amazing, but they do."

Carol Spruell, communications coordinator with Catholic Charities, said as a parent, having that support network is crucial.

"What would I have done without my mom and dad if I was sick or had to go to work," Spruell said.

Thompson said helping the families makes a safer environment for the children.

"Child abuse and neglect rarely happens out of the clear blue sky," Thompson said. The more pressure there is, whether it's unemployment, drug problems, marriage problems or other things, the more the potential for abuse and neglect exist as the pressure become too much.

"And on top of that, these are people who have no resilience," Thompson said. A

missed paycheck could mean a missed opportunity to pay rent. In homeless shelters, if the son is over 12 years old, he can't be kept with the mother and sisters, Thompson said. So, where does he go, she asked.

"What we find is with families where abuse and neglect exist, is that they're isolated," Thompson said.

"A lot of those kids end up in foster care because they're (the parents) desperate," she said. "That's where we want to intervene."

The program is funded through the Casey Family Program with a contract with the state Department of Children and Family Services.

"Our role at Catholic Charities is to build our infrastructure of volunteers," Thompson said.

"We're asking for people to be involved in a capacity that is much more intense than writing a check," Thompson said. "We're asking for them to be face to face with people and love on their kids."

Spruell said Catholic Charities has been working in the community a long time and has a good reputation, which will help it build trust among families in crisis to seek their help.

This program, said David Aguillard, executive director of Catholic Charities, has a much better chance to make a sustaining change in the lives of the families in need and in the lives of the host families than just having staff provide aid.

"I think this strengthens our programs," Aguillard said. "It enables us to stretch our resources."

ä **ON THE INTERNET:**

Safe Families for Children, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge

<http://www.ccdiobr.org/index.php/programs/sfcbr.html>