Charles Settlement House: Service to All Ages, Needs

Gail Blanchard, executive director of the Charles Settlement House.

Photos by Terrence J. Brennan

Anne Marie Colavecchia takes control of a small herd of youngsters while their mothers attend a weekly meeting.

Staff member Pat Lyons teaches the weekly Afternoon Mother's Club how to prepare

Run by the Charles Settlement House at 40 Lee St. and Lyell Avenue, a thriving, busy neighborhood center.

The Charles Settlement offers a host of services to the neighborhood, bound by Lyell Avenue to the north and West Avenue to the south, and Broad Street on the east to the city line. The Settlement offers services to all in the community — including those with low income, to families, the elderly and youth. Its programs reach virtually every age range and many of the social needs of the community. Last year the Charles House served in some way over 3,000 residents.

Founded in 1917 as a Roman Catholic center for Italian and German immigrants, the Charles House is an affiliate of Catholic Charities. The Charles House neighborhood contains a mixture of Hispanics, blacks, whites, and some Laotians and Haitians. There is also a sizeable elderly population in the community. This shift in the makeup of the neighborhood has required a change in the resources provided by the settlement.

The Charles Settlement works closely with area parishes such as St. Peter and Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, Holy Apostles and Holy Family; also with Trinity United Church and Lake Avenue Baptist Church. Gail Blanchard, executive director of the Charles Settlement, said of the parishes, "They're very willing to work together on projects like food and clothing closets."

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Besides these services, the Charles House and area parishes join together to serve the elderly, provide a gym and host a teen disco. Through work with the parishes and Charles House, neighborhood volunteers plan for the human services needs of the community.

"Charles House has a long history with the Catholic Charities community," said Bill Privett, associate director of Catholic Charities. "It incorporates our values in the neighborhood where church services should be most visible. The revitalization of the Charles House is so exciting to see from Catholic Charities as it must be from the neighborhood. Gail Blanchard and Fred Hoog, the chairman of the board, deserve a lot of credit for their hard work. We are also quite pleased to see the stronger relationship between the Settlement House and the parishes."

Volunteers form the backbone of Charles House activities. Ms. Blanchard tells of past years of 20 to 30 Charles House volunteers; the number recently reached near 150. She credits the increase with a rise in the number of those who receive assistance in some form from the Settlement, and, in turn, volunteer in other programs — a healthy and self-sustaining process. As the number of people to be served in the community has risen, so has the activism of area residents in volunteering in and advocating for programs and services for the neighborhood.

While the Charles Settlement looks forward to the results of the human services needs assessment, many of the problems uncovered are already felt at the Settlement. Ms. Blanchard explained that some families will need an emergency food pack, and landlord intervention. The Settlement helps a teacher's aide, a teacher, volunteers, social and counseling services, and operates two senior nutrition sites, a summer day camp, a teen council, and youth and sports clubs. The Charles Settlement also works extensively to refer those in need to other community and social service agencies when appropriate.

Ms. Blanchard said that at the Charles House, they aim to keep the atmosphere informal. "The newcomers and new poor find it the hardest to come in," she said, "so we try to avoid appointments; people in need are welcome here and served on a walk-in basis."

Bill Privett said of the Settlement, "Everyone is aware, from news reports of how our social and economic problems be, I think that an agency like Charles Settlement can have dramatic effect in its own neighborhood by offering hope and care to the young and old, the blacks, Hispanic and white."