

Agency conforms to meet society's changing needs

Continued from page 1

1917, and this year marks the 75th year of Catholic social service coordinated at a diocesan level in the Diocese of Rochester.

Today, however, the Catholic Family Center goes beyond providing "social services" as the aid association's employees would have understood the term. In addition to providing direct aid to individuals and families, the agency is a strong advocate for social change, according to Carolyn Portanova, executive director.

"There is a conscious awareness that we must do advocacy, that the agency can't be just handing things out," Portanova commented. "It is clear that we must have advocacy as part of our mission."

Thus, the agency recently participated in such efforts as a June 16 march on Rochester City Hall to demand reforms in police oversight, and in opposing cutbacks of services by Monroe County.

"We continue to serve families," Portanova added. "But we have changed the way we serve them. It's really looking at the mission of the agency and the needs of our clients, and (adapting) to meet those needs."

Adapting to meet people's needs has been the objective for Catholic Family Center and its predecessors for the past 75 years, and of diocesan Catholic charity work for more than a century.

In his 1950 study of CFC, *The Emergence of the Multiple Functions of the Catholic Family Center of the Diocese of Rochester*, George Montgomery pointed out that Catholic charitable organizations had



Courtesy of Father Robert F. McNamara
Katherine D'Olier (above) spent more than 40 years working for Rochester Catholic Charities Aid Association. Bishop Thomas Hickey (right) supported the development of Catholic Charities.

formed within the diocese even before it broke off from the Buffalo diocese in 1868.

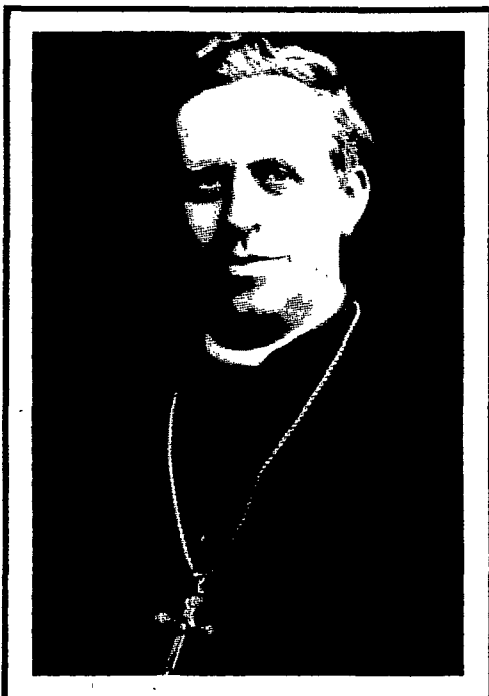
Montgomery noted, for example, that the Catholic Orphan Asylum (St. Patrick's Girls' Home) opened in 1842, and St. Mary's Hospital opened in 1857.

Meanwhile, St. Vincent DePaul societies were flourishing in parishes across the diocese, wrote Montgomery, who later directed the CFC.

In his history of the diocese, *The Diocese of Rochester, 1868-1968*, Father Robert F. McNamara noted that by 1910, then-Bishop Thomas Hickey, began to see a need to coordinate the various charity efforts underway in the diocese.

Toward that end, diocesan representatives participated in 1910 in the formation of United Charities of Rochester — which today continues as Family Service of Rochester, Inc.

Bishop Hickey gradually grew uncomfortable with Catholic participation in the group, however. "His fervor cooled," Father McNamara wrote,



"most likely because he feared that full participation would somehow involve the loss of autonomy on the part of Catholic charities."

Bishop Hickey's efforts to foster and coordinate Catholic charities led in 1912 to the formation of the Catholic Charity Guild — a women's organization — and in 1915 of the Catholic Men's Charity League. The guild undertook a number of charitable works, while the league pursued funding to support those works.

By 1917, dioceses across New York state were seeking ways to better coordinate their charitable efforts. Thanks, in part, to lobbying by Bishop Hickey, the state legislature approved a bill that would allow diocesan charitable-aid societies to incorporate.

On June 28, 1917, a number of the Catholic charitable groups in the diocese — including the Catholic Charity Guild — were incorporated as the Rochester Catholic Charities Aid Association.

Father Jacob Staub, who had staffed the guild's Welfare Department, served as the new organization's first director. Katherine D'Olier was hired as the case worker. Except for a brief period in the early 1920s, she would remain with the agency until 1952.

The aid association encompassed a relief department offering shelter, clothing, job training, and orphan care; a child welfare department; the Anna Wilkins Nursery, established amid an influenza epidemic in 1918; a parole service for men coming out of prison; an immigration service; aid for unmarried mothers; and settlement house programs, including Charles Settlement House, established in 1917.

Shortly after the association was formed, both Father Staub and D'Olier left. His departure was permanent; hers led to a return in 1924. This event so early in the organization's history foreshadowed ongoing personnel changes and restructuring efforts that the organization would undergo over the years.

In 1924, the association was renamed Rochester Catholic Charities, and in 1925, D'Olier was named its supervisor. Montgomery wrote that the appointment was made, in part, because the diocese was suffering from a clergy shortage at the time and had no priest available to fill the post. Although Bishop Hickey told D'Olier to use the title of director, she declined to do so, Montgomery noted.

Problems soon arose over having a woman in charge, however. All of the other Catholic Charities organizations in the state were run by priests, Montgomery wrote, and D'Olier felt she could not attend state meetings as the lone woman.

In 1930, moreover, the founding of

Elmira Catholic Charities led diocesan officials to realize that a diocesan-level director was needed to oversee both the Rochester and Elmira branches.

Thus, in 1930, Father Walter Foery — later Bishop of Syracuse — was named diocesan director of Rochester Catholic Charities, which has evolved into Social Ministry.

D'Olier was placed in charge of the casework agency that remains the Catholic Family Center's core. Further restructuring and title changes eventually led to the naming of D'Olier's department as the Catholic Family Center in 1950.

D'Olier hired Angela Boella as a case worker in 1951, and Boella rose before her 1987 retirement to become supervisor of refugee services.

During a recent interview, Boella recalled D'Olier as "a very strong lady, but very warm. She certainly had concern for the clients and the staff."

Catherine Wobus, who retired as director of CFC's casework services in 1988, noted that the agency was small and closely knit when she began working there in 1943.

The focus in the 1940s and 1950s was still largely on family and child-welfare services, Wobus recalled. Indeed, Montgomery's study noted that this concentration was the impetus for renaming the agency the Catholic Family Center. The intent, he wrote, was "to denote its role as a family centered case work agency, operating according to Catholic philosophy."

But as people's needs began to change, Wobus noted, so did CFC's programs.

"It was a gradual change," Wobus recalled. "They took on more substance abuse. They've established a number of group homes for substance abuse women and their children."

Portanova pointed out that the focus still remains on the family, but explained that the staff's understanding of family problems and ways to approach them have changed due in part to the growth of substance abuse in society.

"You may have an individual come in for substance-abuse treatment, but we try to engage the entire family in the recovery process," Portanova explained. "Substance abuse is a whole family problem."

In fact, she noted, the agency is currently preparing to open two more residential substance-abuse programs: one in Rochester for men, the other in Newark for women. The women's program will be modeled after CFC's five-year-old Liberty Manor in Rochester.

Another landmark event in CFC's history took place June 28, 1992, as CFC moved its administrative offices from the Columbus Civic Center, 50 Chestnut St. — where it had been located since 1937 — to the Sibley Tower Building.

Portanova said the new site will allow the various CFC departments to work together more closely than they could while scattered over several floors at the Chestnut Street building.

Such cooperation will be needed during these troubled economic times, Portanova commented, as CFC contends with growing demands on shrinking financial support. Fiscal restraints already have forced the agency to layoff several staff members, she said.

But Portanova said she views the smaller size as a positive step for the CFC, particularly as it moves into the future.

"We are leaner, but we are getting to be much more efficient," she remarked. "I think we will be even better able to do programming on the cutting edge."

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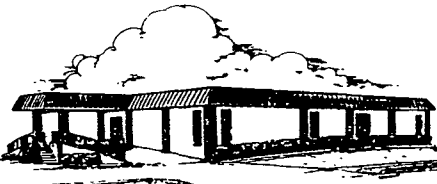
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