

Parenting

Diocese, parishes explore ways to be 'family friendly'

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Children in the rectory. Workers who share jobs. Flexible work schedules. Planning children's and parents' activities to coincide in terms of time and place.

These are among the ways diocesan parishes and the Pastoral Center are trying to become "family friendly."

And, according to Mary Kessler, diocesan director of Human Resources, employees are the ones leading the way. "Our employees have really raised the issues," Kessler said. "They have come up with the creative possibilities, and our managers have been open."

Some parishes, for example, have allowed employees to bring small children to work with them. Couples and individuals have even shared parish jobs by splitting the time between them. In some cases, parish employees are able to do some work at home so they can be with their children or parents. And when employees have to work evening or weekend hours, they are able to take time on other days to take care of familial needs.

Meanwhile, diocesan policies have also been modified to allow for greater flexibility, Kessler noted. Employees are able to use accrued sick time not only when they are ill, but when they have to stay home to take care of sick family members. Part-time employees are given full benefits package, which includes the Employee Assistance Program at Greece's Park Ridge Hospital. Through the program, employees can gain assistance in dealing with such issues as child care, elder care, and stress.

The diocese has also provided employees at the Pastoral Center, parishes and schools with a flexible-spending option through which they can put aside money from their paychecks on a pre-taxed basis for such purposes as medical bills and child-care costs.

Kessler reported that diocesan officials are also looking into ways to formalize "Take your child to work day" — originally intended for daughters, but which has been expanded to include sons, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

"There's a special connection when the kids see where we work," Kessler observed. "It in-

roduces the young people to work and plants some seeds for potential careers."

Kessler admitted that she was not aware of exactly how many diocesan parishes have made arrangements with employees to meet various family concerns. Agreements are made as needs arise, she said, and because they are handled at the parish level, diocesan officials are often not notified of such arrangements.

She did acknowledge that even though there are a number of efforts underway to be "family friendly," diocesan and parish officials can still do more.

All too often, for example, parents are asked to choose between family and parish responsibilities because of meetings and volunteer activities. "Parents already work a full workday," Kessler remarked. "Can we ask them to come out to meetings?"

Concern for both employees, volunteers and parishioners is addressed in the third goal of the diocesan pastoral plan that grew out of the diocesan Synod in October, 1993. That goal calls for diocesan officials to "Examine practices throughout



the diocesan Church for their sensitivity to families and family issues."

"We wanted to make sure it was in the recommendation so we could look at the issue," said Kessler, a member of the pastoral planning team that helped to write that goal.

As they develop responses to this recommendation and to the needs of parents and

families in general, parishes will provide direction for the diocese on issues facing today's families, Kessler predicted.

"How do we respond as a church? How do we respond to stress without putting more on people?" Kessler asked. "The church should be a place — and is a place — where we build up families."

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