

DISABILITIES

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disabilities full participants in all church activities.

The diocese has long served people with various disabilities. In 1951, for example, the Sisters of St. Joseph opened the School of the Holy Childhood, which served Rochester-area children with mental retardation. The school, which is no longer officially affiliated with the diocese, now serves both children and adults with various developmental disabilities. Meanwhile, ministry specifically for deaf Catholics has existed in the diocese since the late 1920s, when the now-defunct St. Francis DeSales Chapel for deaf Catholics began operating in downtown Rochester.

However, diocesan experts on disabilities noted that until the 1970s, ministry to people with disabilities was directed mostly at them rather than *with* them. In 1979, a task force commissioned by Bishop Matthew H. Clark found that the needs of diocesan people with disabilities needed to be better met. In response to that need, Catholic Charities Residential Program was established in 1980. Today, the agency, now called Catholic Charities Community Services, provides a vast array of services to people with developmental disabilities, AIDS and traumatic brain injuries.

Paul Pickering, executive director

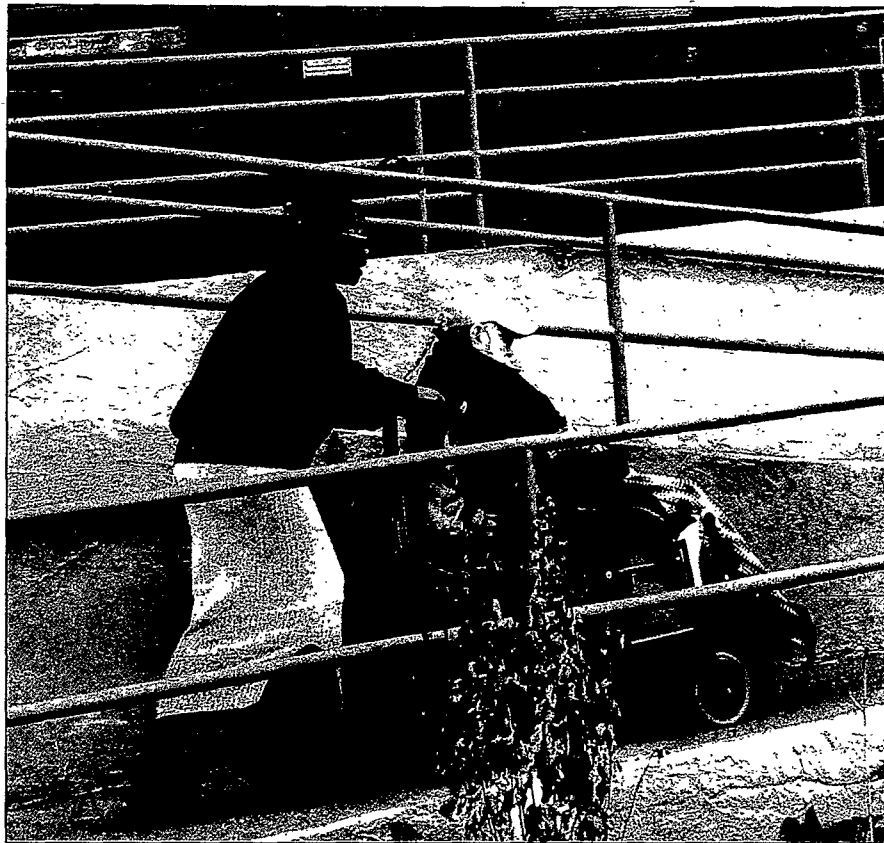
of Catholic Charities Community Services, said the agency currently serves about 400 clients — Catholic and non-Catholic — in Monroe, Wayne, Ontario, Yates and Livingston counties. The agency's mandate is diocesanwide, he said, but tries to plug service gaps rather than duplicate services already provided by agencies in other diocesan counties.

One of the most notable changes he's seen in his field over the years is the deinstitutionalization of thousands of people with developmental disabilities. Today, most people with disabilities live in their own apartments, houses or group homes, he noted.

"I think our goal is to give them as little support as they need and allow them as much freedom and independence as possible," he said.

One Catholic Charities group residence, along with separate neighboring apartments, is located on Tryon Park in Rochester. That's where St. James parishioners David Russell and Daneile Schreib live with eight other residents, according to Cheryl Shepard, residential manager. Other residents worship at St. James and St. Bridget's parishes in Rochester. St. Bridget's also draws parishioners from another Catholic Charities residence, Cloverdale.

"God gave me a great gift of singing," Russell said before demonstrating his tenor talents on the hymn "Surely the Presence of the Lord Is in this Place." Russell noted



Eneida Roman wheels her husband, Ramiro, backwards down the ramp at Rochester's Mt. Carmel Apartments on their way to Mass at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church Nov. 9.

that he's starred in musical-theater productions, and is currently rehearsing for a role in "Grease."

Shepard said many Catholics may not be aware that developmentally disabled people like Russell routinely give back to the community. For example, she said, her home's residents once donated money to buy food and furniture for a family who lost their home in a fire.

"They're very compassionate when it comes to different things like that, and I'm proud of that," she said.

FELLOW PARISHIONERS

People with disabilities and their advocates agree that parish and diocesan facilities have been made more accessible to them in recent years. Most newer church and diocesan buildings were designed to facilitate entrance by people in wheelchairs. Several parishes now have audio-loop systems for people with hearing impairments, and some even offer sign-interpreted Masses. In an informal survey conducted by the *Catholic Courier*, several parishes indicated that they plan to use some of the funds they receive from the Partners in Faith-capital campaign to make their facilities more accessible through renovation.

Meanwhile, the diocese's Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, through parishes and Catholic Charities residences, provides catechetical materials to Catholics who have developmental disabilities. And the diocese encourages parishes to work with parishioners who

have disabilities to discover what their needs are, according to Sister Karen Dietz, SSJ, diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis.

Yet several observers noted that more needs to be done to improve attitudes toward people with disabilities.

"Instead of looking at a person with a disability and thinking, 'He can't serve on a committee or bring up the offertory or lector because of his speech or mobility or visual impairment,' church members need to offer the opportunity to the person with the disability," Kurz said. "If the person with the disability expresses an interest in participating in the offered activity, then church members and the person ... should work together to determine how the person can best be involved."

Weidenborner added that people with disabilities have gifts to offer their fellow Catholics, especially the gift of learning to accept others as they are.

"I really think that it's a gift that I can't see," she said. "Sure, (blindness) has its frustrations, (but) not having sight takes away part of the criteria of judging people."

Anne Sawyko, development director at Catholic Charities Community Services, noted that "persons with physical disabilities have the same obligation to spread the good news, to reach out and do good works."

That's something with which Roman would agree.

"There's a lot of people that need help," she said. "If I stay away from helping them, I die."

GENERAL

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