

The Community Services of Starke County Fund

In the early 1970s, Sister Charles, a geriatric technician from an organization called Catholic Charities, began discussion with leaders in Starke County about the lack of services that were provided in the county for those in need, such as the elderly and those living in poverty.

Together, this group of concerned individuals decided to establish an organization in order to provide assistance to those in need.



They began with a limited budget, forming a Friendly Visiting Program, in which Sister Charles visited seniors, took their blood pressure, and checked their overall health. Soon after came the Call-A-Day Program, which enabled those who lived alone to receive a daily telephone call to ensure their well-being. The Meals-On-Wheels Program was also founded, which brought food to those who were homebound. These programs for seniors were the first manifestation of what is today known as Community Services of Starke County. It was headed by Sister Charles and Joan Haugh, who served as the organization's Executive Director until 2015.

In 1977, the organization became incorporated and started receiving federal funds. With this additional assistance, they were able to open congregate meal sites, at which elderly men and women could enjoy a hot meal five days a week. They also bought a van and hired a part-time driver to serve those with transportation needs.

“Catholic Charities was reluctant at first to accept federal dollars, but they realized that we could not operate successfully without assistance from the federal government,” Joan said.

Before receiving these funds, the organization was only able to support those who were sixty and older. When they began receiving federal funds, they were able to expand their services to many more residents of Starke County. They also were able to buy a second van in 1983, and in 1987 they were able to set aside \$500 to start a food pantry. The food pantry was able to benefit 8-10 families a month; however, this number has grown immensely over the years. With the help of generous donations from the community and government commodities, they were able to serve 250 families in 2011.

Soon, other community projects started to flourish. Some of these projects include the Energy Assistance Program, which served more than 1,000 families in the community in 2011; Homemaker

Services, in which a case manager visits the homes of seniors to determine what assistance they need and helps to ensure that they receive these services; and Starke County Triad, which promotes senior safety. Along with the senior services programs, Community Services of Starke County has a long history of responding to unforeseen needs in the county. Some services that are provided include a resource manual of the agencies that serve Starke County, tax preparation assistance, health equipment loans, and partnering with NIPSCO to bring the Care Hardship Program and Deposit Program to Starke County.

Over time, the organization has continued to grow. With help from a Community Focus Fund (CFF) grant in 1993, Community Services was able to move into a new building and later add onto that building in 2003, due to a second CFF grant.

The organization has also received many grants from the Starke County Community Foundation. In 2002, the Community Foundation helped to fund the renovation of the organization's building. The Community Foundation has also awarded grants to the organization for public transit vans and gasoline, supplies for the food pantry, and utilities. In 2010, Community Services created a fund with the Community Foundation to help the agency's long-term sustainability.

"We are very impressed with the Community Foundation's professionalism and knowledge," said Joan.

State-wide budget cuts have greatly affected Community Services. State funding for programs has been cut since 2006, and Joan expected funds to continue to decrease.

"Anyone that could remember us in their will, whether it is a dollar value or property value, or donate directly to Community Services would be helpful," Joan said. Donations for Community Services of Starke County can also be made to their fund at the Starke County Community Foundation.

Despite setbacks, Community Services continues to grow and to benefit Starke County. The organization began with only two members, Sister Charles and Joan. It now has 18 staff members, which includes 8 full-time and 10 part-time workers, plus an additional 50 volunteers.

"Our salaries have never been high, but we have good staff that cares about the community," explained Joan.

In 2011, Community Services of Starke County touched the lives of 5,801, which constitutes 25% of the county's residents.

Joan said about Community Service's employees and volunteers, "When they go home at the end of the day, they feel good about what they did because they've helped someone."