

Geauga Community Action playing bigger role at home

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

You'll be hearing more about Geauga Community Action, Inc.

The group's Executive Director Bob Voss met last month with Rotary of Chagrin Valley to get the word out about the group's mission.

"Gaugua Community Action has been one of the best kept secrets in Geauga County. Most people have never heard of it," he said. "I want to get our name out so people can begin calling us directly. At that point, we will either offer our direct assistance or refer them to an already established agency."

The group provides assistance to eligible Geauga County residents, whether it's to help pay bills, temporary shelter or possibly get a loan to buy a car.

Mr. Voss has been working out of his home for the past year as an independent contractor. But the board recently offered him a part-time position as the agency's first employee. An office is being prepared at 470 Center St. in Chardon in Building 5, which will be the agency's first official home.

Mr. Voss joined the Community Action last year after retiring from public service in 2014. He had worked at the Metzenbaum Center for 24 years and at Geauga County Job and Family Services for six years.

The agency's only source of funding comes from the federal government in the form of block grants to Ohio. These funds were primarily due to the legislative efforts passed by former President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

With the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, a committee at large meeting washeld to establish a local anti-poverty agency that would engage the entire community, particularly low-income residents, in addressing causes and conditions of poverty, Mr. Voss said. In 1965 Community Action Programs were created across the nation.

The programs were tasked with providing local, community-based advocacy for the poor and were provided the means to shape anti-poverty initiatives, he said. At its inception, funds from the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity were provided to support trips for children in poverty, remedial reading programs, job counseling and for dependent daycare services, he noted.

Today, these federal dollars continue to be allocated to each state in the form of block grants and then made available to Community Action agencies to fight poverty at the local level. Generally, the funding formulas are based on a county's population and the projection of what percentage of the residents are at or below the federal poverty level. Today, there are more than 1,000 community action agencies across the nation.

Gaugua Community Action received a two-year grant of about \$275,000 to operate. While the federal government provides funding to the state, the local community action boards determine what specific programs will help address the needs and priorities of their counties, he said.

Each community action agency is governed by a board of directors consisting of at least one-third low-income community representatives, one-third public officials, and one-third private sector leaders.

The 15-member Geauga Community Action board reflects a wide diversity of backgrounds and experience. The Board is also mandated to nominate individuals who use the services to give for those who may have similar needs, he said.

Currently, Geauga Community Action contracts with Geauga County Job & Family Services to provide Emergency assistance for food, medical, fuel oil, temporary shelter, first-month's rent, security deposit, late rent and gas vouchers.

"It's a hand up, not a hand out," he said. As a result, a person can request help once a year for each emergency assistance category.

Gaugua Community Action also contracts with United Way Services of Geauga to partially fund its 2-1-1 program.

Historically, it has been these two contract agencies that have helped Geauga Community Action assess the needs in Geauga County and determine eligibility, he said. In order to be eligible, families or individuals must be at or below 125 percent the federal poverty level, which is defined as just under \$1,000 per month for an individual.

Seniors on a fixed income can be hit hard during tough economic times. For example, they can experience trouble, especially during a harsh winter, when fuel oil is very expensive, Mr. Voss noted.

"Our seniors shouldn't have to make a decision between paying for their prescription pills or heating their homes," he said. "Everyone's basic needs should be met. There are many different reasons for needing a little help."

The growth in heroin addiction is another problem to be addressed.

"This drug literally devastates individuals' lives as well as their children," he said. Loss of a job, incarceration or fatal overdose can result in a family falling into poverty and perhaps being temporarily homeless for the first time, Mr. Voss said.

Even though Geauga County does not have an adult homeless shelter does not necessarily mean that there is not a need for one, he said.

"Consequently, homeless adults have to be referred out of our county for help at this time," he said. "We want to get the message out that we are here to help. If we can't help you directly, then we will partner with our local churches, public and other private agencies to provide the appropriate assistance or services."

The agency is in the process of launching a new program to help drivers get a loan to buy a used car so can they can get to work, Mr. Voss said.

"You just can't survive long under those conditions in Geauga County," he said. "So, we're trying to make the loan affordable enough for people to get a car, to keep their job and then pay back the loan. It's a win-win for the individual, employer, lending agency and ultimately the taxpayers," he said.

Anyone with questions or who wants more information about Geauga Community Action can reach Mr. Voss at 440-286-4765.