

SUBURBAN JOURNALS

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Crisis Nursery opens in Wentzville

By Jami Defenbaugh

When Charlotte McClure retired, she knew she wanted to volunteer to help children.

Reading reports about child abuse eventually led her in one direction.

"There's nothing more depressing than reading the newspaper, seeing a family in need and thinking, 'Oh! If they had only known about Crisis Nursery,'" she said.

McClure, of Chesterfield, has been helping that very St. Louis organization with programs and events for the past two years.

Crisis Nursery is known as a 24-hour safe haven. Families can bring their children to any of its four nursery sites - two of which are in St. Charles - for a number of reasons, including a family illness or death; lack of utilities, food or shelter; domestic violence; or overwhelming parental stress. Their stay involves a medical exam, medication, meals, activities and therapy. Follow-up programs also are available.

But until last week, a number of factors were keeping families in western St. Charles County at bay, Crisis Nursery Executive Director DiAnne Mueller has said. Many didn't know the service existed. Gas prices continued to climb. Parents lacked reliable transportation. And most importantly, a lack of bed space in St. Charles facilities has forced Crisis Nursery to turn about 450 children needing their services away each year, she said.

On Aug. 15, all that changed with the grand opening of the organization's newest location in Wentzville. The brick home can house 10 more children and will be Crisis Nursery's third nursery in St. Charles



[ROY SYKES](#) PHOTO -- Guests line up Friday to tour the new Crisis Nursery in Wentzville during the facility's grand-opening ceremony. The nursery can house as many as 10 children at a time and officials estimate it will serve more than 400 additional children each year.

County. It sits on a 19-acre tract of land donated by SSM St. Joseph Health Center-Wentzville and located on the hospital's campus at 700 Medical Drive in Wentzville. The facility was built at cost by T. R. Hughes Inc. and funded by the St. Charles County Community and Children's Resource Board.

Inside the building, McClure gazed at a playroom with bright, lime-colored walls, flowered curtains and piles of toys. Volunteering for Crisis Nursery is the best part of her life right now, she said.

Even so, McClure said, the growing number of families needing the organization's services is surprising.

"You'd hope it would be declining, but unfortunately, the bad news is there is still a need," she said. "The good news is we have Crisis Nursery doing something about it."

REPORT SHOWS A NEED FOR SERVICES

Statistics show McClure is right. According to the resource board, the respite care services that Crisis Nursery provides can be the difference between keeping a family together or apart, and are the most requested services of families experiencing a crisis that increases the risk of child abuse or neglect.

But that's not all. The board administers the Community Children's Service Fund created by a one-eighth-cent sales tax measure approved by St. Charles County voters in November 2004. Those funds are dedicated for services to St. Charles County children and youth, and are awarded to local agencies based on a needs assessment the board conducts every two years. According to its 2008 report, there were 1,581 hot line calls of suspected child abuse and neglect made from July 2005 to July 2006 to the St. Charles County Children's Division - a 1.3 percent increase from the assessment reports two years before. But, the report says, while numbers have increased, "the percentages are down as the growth in county population far exceeds the growth in numbers of child abuse incidents." The report goes on to say that of those 1,581 calls, probable cause for child abuse and neglect was substantiated in 155 of the reports, representing 204 children, a decrease of 20.6 percent; neglect represented 29 percent of the substantiated cases, a decrease of 63.8 percent; and 773 families, or 1,080 children, were assigned for Family Assessment services, a decrease of 9.7 percent of the number of families and a decrease of 11 percent in the number of children referred.

Missouri Kids Count collaborates with 35 organizations and government agencies to publish an annual report of the well-being of children in every Missouri county. According to 2007 data, child abuse and neglect in St. Charles County was at 14.6 percent, a number that has steadily declined from 26.1 percent in 2001.

These numbers have gone down in part thanks to funding from state, county and local agencies. Gov. Matt Blunt has regularly supported funding for crisis nurseries, providing more than \$1.3 million in the fiscal year 2009 budget to help fund the programs and services they provide. Blunt also signed legislation creating the Children in Crisis tax credit for up to 50 percent of donations to any organization that receives funding from the Court Appointed Special Advocate Fund, child advocacy center or crisis care center. In 2007, Crisis Nursery received close to \$400,000 from the Community and Children's Resource Board, and partners such as SSM St. Joseph Health Care have provided food and nursery items for years. That support has paid off. According to the resource board's report, the Crisis Nurseries in 2007 provided respite to 1,943 children - 51.7 percent more than two years earlier. Of the children

seen, 99 percent returned to their natural family and 100 percent remained free from any abuse or neglect, the report said.

NEW LOCATION MEANS EXPANDING SERVICES

Despite Crisis Nursery's progress, the need for its services continues to rise. The resource board's report said the nurseries turned away 790 children in 2007, and while the Wentzville facility will serve an additional 416 children, hundreds still will need help. The cost to fill the organization's demand would be more than \$123,000, the report said.

Still, officials continue to make positive strides. The new Wentzville location will help Crisis Nursery expand its Wentzville programs, which include parenting education, home visits, therapy and developmental screenings for children.

McClure, who heads the Best Friends Group, Crisis Nursery's volunteer program, said she has seen a tremendous growth of volunteers in the St. Charles County area, and even more so with word of the new Wentzville location.

Crisis Nursery also will continue to maintain strong relationships with local social service agencies, churches and schools, all of which often refer individuals and families to the organization, Mueller said.

"That's the model of the nursery," she said. "We see it as our job to be out in the community finding out what its needs are, and then, as quickly as possible with as little red tape as possible, meeting those needs."

It's that kind of teamwork that will help Crisis Nursery continue to make a difference, Bruce Sowatsky, executive director of the resource board, said during the Wentzville facility's grand-opening ceremony Friday.

"Today is confirmation that God sees children hurting and in pain, and he pulls together the right people," Sowatsky said.

Crisis Nursery 2007 statistics

- > 4,695 children were admitted to the Crisis Nursery.
- > 4,909 families were provided counseling and support.
- > 1,390 community outreach visits were conducted.
- > 283 special needs children were cared for at the Crisis Nursery.
- > 24,268 volunteer hours were logged.
- > 180,921 referrals were given to families in crisis.

The Wentzville Crisis Nursery will provide:

- > A 24-hour safe haven for children from birth up to age 12.
- > A 24-hour help line offering crisis counseling to families.
- > Physical and developmental assessments for children.
- > Therapeutic activities for children.
- > Home visits for families
- > Parent education groups

Want to help?

To become part of Crisis Nursery's Best Friends Group and help with fundraising events, mailing and other special projects, e-mail Charlotte McClure at cmclure1@sbcglobal.net or call 636-675-5275.

For more information on volunteer opportunities, e-mail MaryPat Smith at Marypat@crisisnurserykids.org or call 636-887-3070.

To contact the Wentzville Crisis Nursery, call 636-887-3070.