

LOCAL

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Grants give handicapped kids, kin break

By LORI BRASIER

Of The Oakland Press

Taking care of a child is big job. Taking care of a handicapped child can be overwhelming.

But a pilot program in Oakland County is helping parents cope with the rigors of raising a special child.

The Shared Parenting program, sponsored by the Oakland County Chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens, matches up disabled children with volunteer families who take them into their homes 13 or 14 days a month.

The time away gives the children's parents and siblings "time to recuperate," said

Fran O'Connell, director of the program for ARC.

"There is an unbelievable fatigue issue that comes from caring for a disabled child for 16 or 18 years," O'Connell said. "This gives everybody a chance to rest their muscles, their minds. To just plain rest up."

It also helps keep such children in the community and out of institutions and foster care homes, O'Connell said.

The program began in July 1988, with grant money. Currently there are six families participating, with another three to begin in November. O'Connell's target for June 1990 is to have 12 families enrolled.

Volunteer families come

"We need families willing to make a long-term commitment."

Fran O'Connell

program director

from a variety of areas, but they are similar in many ways, O'Connell said.

"I have found some common threads," said O'Connell.

"First of all, they are very family oriented; their families are the most important things in their lives."

"And there is an overwhelming acceptance of people," she said. "Some of

these children are multiple impaired, with physical impairments that makes it difficult to care for (them). But these families see those (impairments) as part of the person. There is a sense of acceptance that is out of the ordinary."

And those qualities are sometimes hard to find.

O'Connell said that she has plenty of families with handicapped children, but not nearly enough volunteer families to share in the parenting. Some of the volunteers are relatives or family friends who knew the handicapped child before the program began.

"I really encourage them to find their own co-parents," O'Connell said. "It makes it

easier."

She also actively solicits volunteer families, making speeches to community groups and talking to other mental health workers.

"We need families willing to make a long-term commitment," O'Connell said.

"Sometimes these kids can be behavioral challenges, and there are all different levels of multiple handicaps."

The volunteer families are paid \$35 a day, with grant money. Those who need help or would like to volunteer, may call the Association for Retarded Citizens, Oakland County, 646-4522.

■ Second family gives some special help, E-8

Oakland family shares love, care

By LORI BRASIER

Of The Oakland Press

Shannon Ofiara is 15 years old. But in many ways she is like an infant. Without constant care, she would soon die.

Born premature, Shannon underwent emergency heart surgery shortly after birth that left her deaf, blind and with cerebral palsy. She is confined to a wheelchair and will be for the rest of her life.

Her tragedy is her family's tragedy, and they suffer too, though in different ways.

To her mother, Judy Ofiara, Shannon is the newborn who will never take that first step, never say that first word. Shannon is the child who will always need to be bathed and fed and put to bed.

"It is a constant pressure," Ofiara said. "It's hard to find time to do the grocery shopping or clean house. Plus the physical side of it. She's just plain heavy to lift."

Ofiara works full time as an Oakland County sheriff's deputy and is divorced.

Shannon was the reason her

three older siblings sometimes missed out on the things all kids like to do — they often had to be home to help take care of her.

"Each child has had to give up a lot," Ofiara said.

The Ofiara family's burden has been lifted somewhat in recent months, thanks to a new program called Shared Parenting, sponsored by the Association for Retarded Citizens.

Now, Shannon spends three days a week with her "other family," Mark and Robin Smith and their four children.

The Smith family of Waterford Township, takes Shannon on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, giving the Ofiara family a break from the constant care.

"I wouldn't even be able to exist without it," Judy Ofiara said of Shared Parenting. "It has made all the difference."

For the Smith family, it is a chance to help.

"People ask us all the time why we do it," Robin Smith said. "We can not understand why someone would not want to do it."

"I've never been in a position where I've needed help and not

been able to get it. We're just giving back a little."

In addition to their four small children, the Smiths have a 19-year-old foster son who has severe disabilities. He, too, is confined to a wheelchair.

Robin Smith said her own children have come to learn acceptance of disabilities, and that they are very helpful in taking care of those in the household who need it.

"They don't mind at all," she said. "Sometimes we can't just hop in the van and go, but they've learned to adjust."

Besides, her children, ages 3, 4, 6 and 8, have a special status among their peers, she said.

"Nobody else in the neighborhood has kids in wheelchairs," she said.

Both Robin Smith and Judy Ofiara said the adjustment for Shannon has been difficult, but that she is learning to cope. She uses a modified sign language and those who want to communicate with her form signs with her fingers.

Ofiara said she uses that sign language to reassure Shannon that she is away from her mother's, and to help develop a routine,