



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

NEWS RELEASE

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Lutheran Social Services of Illinois Celebrates 20 Years of Serving Southern Illinois Communities

On October 14, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) will celebrate its 20th anniversary of providing services in southern Illinois. Staff members, volunteers, donors and other guests will gather at Giant City State Park Lodge in Makanda for a special day of speakers, team-building and presentation of employee recognition awards.

From noon-1:00 p.m., a variety of speakers will share their memories of LSSI's 20 years in southern Illinois, including John Schnier, executive director of LSSI's Children's Community Services (CCS); Jane Otte, executive director, LSSI's Prisoner and Family Ministry; Dr. Lynn Smith, past LSSI Board Member (Carbondale) and chair of the SIU Department of Curriculum and Instruction; and Larry Johnson, associate executive director, who oversees LSSI's child welfare services in the region. The Rev. Dr. Denver Bitner, LSSI president, will also speak, along with other staff members, past and present, and LSSI supporters from the community.

"In this region, our agency is known for being a resource in our communities and for the excellent services we provide, particularly in the areas of child welfare and services for prisoners and their families," says Bitner. "We have highly dedicated, well-trained staff members who are helping children and families have better lives, exemplifying our agency's mission of bringing healing, justice and wholeness to people and communities."

Smith, a member of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Carbondale and a member of the committee that helped bring LSSI to southern Illinois 20 years ago says, "The agency's mission is a part of the people who are LSSI. The whole agency operates out of care and commitment."

LSSI's expansion to southern Illinois began in October 1989, when it opened an office in Marion with a budget of \$50,000. At the time, services included family counseling and services for prisoners and their families. Prior to that, LSSI's only involvement in southern Illinois was when LSSI helped a small prison ministry group obtain funding to buy an old hotel in Vienna — later called Hospitality House — to provide lodging for families visiting their incarcerated loved ones in the area.

Today, LSSI has three offices in southern Illinois — in Marion, Harrisburg and Vienna — but its staff travels throughout 24 counties to serve people, including: Alexander, Clay, Crawford, Edwards, Franklin,

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Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Lawrence, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Richland, Saline, Union, Wabash, Wayne, White and Williamson. The offices provide adoption and foster care services, Intact Family services, pregnancy counseling, and Prisoner and Family Ministry programs, which include Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives, the Storybook Project and Re-entry Services. In addition, LSSI has also been involved in two disaster relief efforts in southern Illinois — the flood of 1993, particularly in Calhoun County and Alexander County; and tornado relief efforts in 2003 in a seven-county area in deep southern Illinois.

LSSI is the one of the major providers of foster care in the southernmost 14 counties of Illinois for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The most significant period of growth in LSSI's foster care caseload came in 2002 when the methamphetamine crisis hit the area. By late 2004, one-third of the agency's foster care cases in southern Illinois were meth-related.

“We grew to meet the need,” says Larry Johnson, who oversees LSSI's child welfare services and 75 staff in the region. He says that LSSI has played an influential role in helping find agency and community solutions to the drug problems that have affected the area.

LSSI currently serves 280 children in the foster care program and 50 families in the Intact Family program. The latter includes families of children whom DCFS has determined to be abused or neglected but who may remain in the home while services are given to the family to remediate the situation.

LSSI's Prisoner and Family Ministry serves more than 300 children of incarcerated parents annually through its Storybook Project and Re-entry Services for people coming home from prison to southern Illinois. Another 60 incarcerated youth and adults help frame homes for Habitat for Humanity affiliates through Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives. PFM also facilitates the Southern Illinois Re-entry Group (SIRG), which is a network of providers, parole and community people who are dedicated to helping people released from prison. Every year, 100 men and women released from prison receive assistance through SIRG.

“Prisoner and Family Ministry is about community engagement on behalf of those in prison, those returning home and their families,” says Jane Otte, executive director. “We celebrate our growing number of volunteers who step out of their comfort zones to go to jail, helping families stay connected through the Storybook Project and also assisting people coming home from prison. It is tough but valuable work that is a blessing to each person — the volunteer, the prisoner, the children whose parents are in prison and our community as a whole.”

For more information on Lutheran Social Services of Illinois in southern Illinois, call 618/997-9196, ext. 824, or visit www.LSSI.org.

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About Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Founded in 1867, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois is a statewide, not-for-profit social service agency of the three Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. For more information on Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, visit www.LSSI.org.