Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois is the statewide social service agency of the Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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MISSION STATEMENT
Responding to the Gospel, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois brings healing, justice and wholeness to people and communities.

VISION STATEMENT
Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, as one agency with many expressions, will create community by graciously serving as both the employer and provider of choice.

www.LSSI.org

ON THE COVER…
After his adoption was finalized at the Peoria County Courthouse, Chris Bill, 5, celebrated by having ice cream with his family. His foster sister, Sophie was also adopted the same day.

Cover photo: Jo Ann Dollard

What You Give From the Heart
LSSI clients, volunteers and staff from around the state reflect on what Christmas means to them.

Finding Support, Strength and Possibilities
LSSI’s Single Parent Program helps participants find support and develop skills that lead to greater independence and self-empowerment.

When I Was in Prison, You Visited Me
Thursday Ministry volunteers reach out to Dixon Correctional Center inmates, bringing love and spiritual inspiration.

Adoption Day: Sharing the Joy
In late August, when Chris and Sophie officially became members of Shaun and Kim Bill's family, their loved ones and friends were there to celebrate.

Keeping Families Intact
LSSI’s Intact Family Recovery Program helps mothers go from being addicted to becoming self-sufficient and able to keep their families together.

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Eye on LSSI
Winter 2005 • Volume 20, Number 3
“We come to the hungry feast
hungry for a word of peace
To hungry hearts unsatisfied
the love of God is not denied.
We come, we come to the hungry feast.

We come to the hungry feast
hungry for a world released
from hungry folks of ev'ry kind,
the poor in body, poor in mind.
We come, we come to the hungry feast.

We come to the hungry feast
hungry that the hunger cease,
and knowing, though we eat our fill,
the hunger will stay with us still.
We come, we come to the hungry feast.”


One of the abiding tensions of our life of faith is captured in this lovely song: We hunger that the world know the shalom of God (“a word of peace”), that the broken world be released from the many and varied hungers of its children (the many faces of poverty), that the hunger around us cease even as our hunger for this “stay with us still.”

Over the past many years, we often have written about the “shalom” of God referred to in Isaiah 65:19-23.

For me, reflecting on what Christmas means at Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) is coming anew each December to an inner sense of peace and ease with this odd set of circumstances. But here at LSSI it has, happily, taken on an active public dimension that has augmented and enriched the inner sense of ease with these tensions. For here, we get to actually work in the broken world for peace through our various programs, services and ministries.

There are several stories in this issue of Eye on LSSI that focus on how LSSI helps strengthen families. When a mother is strengthened with support and a chance to learn new skills to create a better life for herself and her children (see story about Single Parent program on page 6); or treatment can be provided for a parent in the grip of substance abuse (see story about the Intact Family Recovery Program on page 16); or a child can escape from an abusive situation and discover a permanent, safe and loving home (see story about the Bill family, which has adopted four foster children, on page 12); or a host of people across the state speak out to the legislators regarding the importance of a pending legislation (see Advocacy Agenda article on page 9); — and when we, through our work, have been instrumental in enabling these things to come to pass — hungers have been met, shalom enjoyed, the tension embraced. Christmas is about the joy that comes with knowing that one’s sense of service and one’s sense of God’s will are one.

Frederick Buechner offers these words: “Where God wants you to be is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Christmas is about knowing that our joy serving people in need is equaled only by God’s joy in having us do precisely that with our lives. It is about feeling like we are where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing ... glad to be there doing what we are doing ... and so finally at peace.

In short, it is summarized in a word about God’s loving intention for the world caught up in the story of his sending his son to bear its suffering, heal its wounds, bringing the children of the world such peace as we may enjoy. And, perhaps most especially for us, it is about knowing that we who would tenderly put our arms around the baby Jesus and welcome him are called to embrace lives devoted to also embracing the things — justice, peace and mercy — and the people — the widow, the orphan and the sojourner/stranger — whom he embraced.

Frederick Aigner, Pastor
President, LSSI
Christmas is a time for friendly smiles, friendly handshakes, hugs. Also, the presents aren’t everything (nice but they aren’t everything to me). For me it’s the warmness, content[ment], feeling of giving someone [something] that you’ll know that they’ll enjoy … It’s really not in the receiving but in the giving truly.

—Bill Carraher, resident
Fox Hill CILA, Aurora

Fox Hill CILA (Community Integrated Living Arrangement) is a group home for adults with Prader-Willi syndrome.

Though we get tangled in the “tinsel” of Christmas, there really is no gift greater than hope expressed through the love of family members for one another. At Christmas, family members of women at Dwight Correctional Center might be a little different than other folks. Perhaps for them the best Christmas gift would be a reunited family. As one who drives children and caregivers to see women at Dwight, the strongest emotions I see are renewed hope and joy after a visit, because children and adults have seen and heard that they are dearly missed and loved. Hope has been restored.

—Jean B. Jenkins, Visits to Mom/Visits to Dad volunteer driver
Prisoner and Family Ministry

Christmas with LSSI is like being one of Santa’s elves with an extra special warmth in your heart at the end of a very long year. Christmas with LSSI is hustle and bustle, organization and chaos, work and play, providing treasures and treats for people of all ages. Christmas with LSSI is the one time of year long days just don’t seem

CHRISTMAS MAY MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE, BUT CONNECTING WITH THE PEOPLE WE LOVE, GATHERING WITH FAMILY, EXPRESSING A SPIRIT OF SHARING AND REFLECTING ON OUR FAITH ARE WHAT MAKES THE HOLIDAY SPECIAL FOR MANY OF US. THE FOLLOWING ARE WRITINGS FROM LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF ILLINOIS (LSSI) CLIENTS, VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF ON WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS TO THEM.
long enough when you’re planning a Christmas party or filling a wish list. Christmas with LSSI involves many familiar and unfamiliar faces to make wishes near and far come true.

Christmas with LSSI just wouldn’t be possible without a community of elves. From staff, to volunteers, to local businesses, to churches, to families all willing to donate time, money and love to others they may never meet. Most of all, Christmas with LSSI is teamwork between family, friends, co-workers and communities ensuring happiness for the children we strive to protect, serve and nurture. To all of those involved, THANK YOU!!!

—Shanda (Feather) Sylwester, Child Welfare Services licensing specialist LSSI Southern Region, Marion

Christmas is waiting for the birth of the baby Jesus. At Christmas, we celebrate with family and friends, and we spend time in unity and peace.

—Evalinda, Latino Group participant Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program, Chicago

What I’m looking forward to this Christmas is introducing my new little guy [a foster child] in our life to all our [holiday] traditions.

But I want him to learn that Christmas is what you give from the heart. We decided a long time ago — my husband and I — when our three oldest sons were younger that we didn’t like the “gimme, gimme, gimme” surrounding Christmas. At the time, they didn’t get the concept of it’s not what you get, it’s what you give. So it’s now a tradition in our house that each kid in our house takes an ornament [with a wish list] from the Angel Tree at Wal-Mart or at our church. They each pick someone who’s the same age as they are.

My husband died two years ago. Last year was the first Christmas without him and was the anniversary of his dying, but the kids’ attitudes [five sons, ages 5 — 18, one adopted, one foster, three biological] helped all of us get through it. Going out and getting those kids’ names off the tree didn’t fix our Christmas, but when it was such a sad time, giving gifts to other kids in the community helped tremendously.

Last year, our church bought gifts for 100 kids served by Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). My adopted son, Victor, 10, is developmentally challenged. I wondered how well he’d get the idea of buying gifts for other kids. But he did get it. He was worried why their mommies weren’t buying them toys. We feel very blessed that Lutheran [Social Services] does accept gifts for kids. That’s what Christmas is about.

—Michelle Hutchison, LSSI foster and adoptive parent Buncombe

Christmas means sharing warmth with loved ones … warm homes, warm family, warm food. To be without warmth on Christmas is a state that nobody should endure and we should come together as a society to prevent it at any cost. Whether one is employed in a helping field, volunteering or donating resources, we are all able to reach those in need and extend some warmth.

—Emily Polak, family service worker Winthrop Children’s Center, Chicago

[Christmas] is a day to reflect on the past year on how good my God has been in my life and gives me the opportunity to give back some small amount of joy to someone else’s life, which doesn’t [compare] to the gifts I’ve received.

—Andre J., Men’s Residence West 2005 alumni Elgin

The Men’s Residence West is a halfway house for men in recovery from addictions who are transitioning back to regular life.

Christmas time is a time of joy and jubilation which is frequently [expressed through] songs and caroling. Whenever I hear “Away in a Manger,” it reminds me of my daughter Laura, who was adopted from China when she was one and had some difficulties speaking English. We had been working with a speech therapist for nearly a year, and progress was slow. In December, when she was a little over three years old, she began speaking in short sentences, except when she would sing “Away in a Manger,” a song she learned on her own by listening to the music we played at holiday time.

Out of nowhere, Laura would begin to sing “Away in a Manger” and she would sing all three verses by memory, modifying the words “Lord Jesus” to “baby Jesus” instead. Some would say it was a miracle.

Today, she speaks rapidly and fluently, non-stop! It’s hard to remember there was a time when she didn’t talk, but every Christmas time we are reminded of our personal miracle.

—Pam Parkos, adoptive mother Park Ridge
The story of the birds is beloved — and explains Christmas to me.

A man who had sent his family off to Christmas Eve worship noticed that a bitter storm was coming up. He saw birds swirling in the winds — and went out to help them. He tried to shoo them into his barn, but they scattered. He turned the barn light on and off, hoping to attract them. Finally he thought, “If I could only be a bird, I could lead them to safety.” In that moment, he understood a beautiful little baby lying in a manger — and I understand that because He became one of us, I can become one with Him, and one with those who suffer, in their pain, in their dementia, in their hopelessness.

Thank God for simple stories — of birds — and of a Baby lying in a manger.

—Dr. Chuck Olson, Chaplain
P.A. Peterson Center for Health
Rockford

The day after Christmas and all through the office, we are just beginning to send gifts to the “Santas” we know. Over the years, good folks, including some students from a public school in Chicago, have made sure our RAPP (Relatives as Parents Program)* families most in need have boxes full of appropriate gifts and gift certificates for food delivered before Christmas.

But it is the day after Christmas that is special to those of us who know the dear and generous relatives that care for the children until mom comes home from prison. Some years ago, St. John’s Lutheran Church in Bloomington began collecting gift certificates for these special women. We always hold off sending them until the day after Christmas so the grandmothers and other relatives won’t be tempted to give them to the children. We include a note telling the caregivers that the certificate is for them, wishing them a blessed Christmas season and telling them how impressed we are by their good efforts with the children. (The certificates arrive just in time for the end of year sales!) The responses we receive back tell us how delighted the caregivers are that they received a gift for themselves.

—Sr. Pat Davis,
Family Connections, assistant director
Prisoner and Family Ministry

*IThe Relatives as Parents Program is a support group for caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated.

I was born and raised in southern Germany. In 1945, I was six years old, and Europe was in a shambles. Still, Christmas was a wonderful celebration.

Preparations for Christmas started in November. Christmas cookies weren’t bought in stores or bakeries; they were baked at home.

We also had two Santa Clauses. The first one came on December 12th. He was the mean Santa. On December 18th or 20th, the real Santa Claus would come. He was dressed like a bishop in beautiful robes, a tall hat and white gloves. He would hand out apples, nuts and, if you were lucky, oranges. On December 24th, the big celebration would take place. I can still remember the smell of a real Christmas tree filling the house. My parents would decorate the tree in the living room behind closed doors. I remember always trying to look through the keyhole to see what was going on in there.

When dinner was over, a bell would ring, and that was when the kids could go see the Christmas tree. It was decorated with tinsel and decorations and lighted with real candles. It still gives me goosebumps when I remember seeing the tree for the first time. My family would gather around it and say a prayer and sing some Christmas carols. Then, we could open gifts. I can still remember when I got my first sled, my first skis, my first ice skates. Then, my family would go to church at midnight.

December 25th was play day! December 26th was visiting day. We would go around and visit aunts, uncles and cousins. Everyone was off of work and school, and it was a holiday until January 2nd. I remember skating and sledding and skiing in the Alps with my friends during that whole time off.

Even though we didn’t have a lot, Christmas was wonderful. Now, it’s much quieter with not as much celebration as when I was a kid. But, I like to have a tree and sit by it and just take everything in.

—John Peter, resident
P.A. Peterson Center for Senior Housing
Rochelle

I like Christmas because the house is always filled with your children and grandchildren. You get to see all your old friends you don’t get to see during the year.

—Clara Larson, resident
P.A. Peterson Center for Health
Rockford

Christmas to me is memories of my ma and pa [in Sweden]. Ma would make lutefisk, limpa [bread] and beans — a full smorgasbord. My sister would play Christmas songs on the piano, and family and friends would drop by.

—Thorsten, resident
St. Matthew Center for Health
Park Ridge

Every day should be Christmas! During the Christmas season, most people dedicate time to their families, friends and the Lord. This should be done on a daily basis, “Love one
another, period.” Gifts are nice, but the true gift is pure love.

—Margaret Wright, parent
Messiah Englewood Head Start
Chicago

To me, Christmas means being with your family that you have not seen in a while. Everybody getting along. And, of course, the presents!

—Xavier, Steps to Life participant,
Chicago

Steps to Life is a program for teenage foster children served by LSSI that seeks to help them develop a vision for their lives and skills for transitioning into adulthood.

When you give somebody a present [and] you put your Christmas tree up, then Christmas comes.

—Kiary, student
North Austin Head Start
Chicago

As a child, I loved Christmas. It meant a time of being with my family, going to church and sitting around the dining room table enjoying great food. I remember opening presents on Christmas Eve and anticipating the special gifts Santa would leave me on Christmas morning.

As an adult, my family [became] smaller due to death and distance. Childhood traditions were put away. I did not have a family to share those special holiday rituals. Mostly, I worked hard to stay busy and distracted during the holidays, from Thanksgiving to January 1.

My beautiful four-year-old adopted daughter, Halle, has changed my outlook on Christmas. With Halle, I have the opportunity to pass on family traditions and keepsakes. Our first Christmas together, 2003, I gave Halle my 45+-year-old copy of ’Twas the Night Before Christmas and read her the story before she fell asleep.

I believe Christmas is about the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and is a special time for all people, regardless of age. But I also believe that my celebrations of Christmas are much more special because I can share them with Halle. Plus, it is so much fun shopping for Christmas presents for her.

—Dr. Sharon Evans,
adoptive mother
Macomb

I am from Colombia. In my country, we celebrate Christmas through the whole month of December. We sing songs called villancicos [songs about Jesus’ birth]. And we have posadas or noventas, which are reunions where people pray and eat traditional foods for nine days.

On the 24th, we celebrate the birth of Jesus. And we have a family dinner with tamales. We also have fireworks and a party.

For me, Christmas is a time of sharing, caring for others and teaching our children about our traditions.

—Adriana Klepp, family service worker
Trinidad Head Start, Chicago

Christmas in my family was always a very special time. We were blessed with a Christmas tree, plenty of food, and friends and family to share the holidays with.

The Christmas that stands out most in my mind was the first Christmas after my divorce. I had been married for 18 years and my children always had family and friends around, lots of holiday festivities and we were blessed to have lots of presents around the tree.

My first Christmas as a single person was quite different. All of my family lived far away, so there was no family that year to share the holiday.

I told myself I had a job but was only making $5.50 an hour. I was lucky to have a nice home and keep food on the table; however, there was no extra money for the holiday season. I fretted and stewed and worried myself sick. How could I give my children the holidays they were used to?

I came home from work on December 19 and when I retrieved the mail there was a registered letter slip stating that I had a letter at the post office to pick up. I went to the post office with a very BAD attitude. I picked up an envelope with no return address on it. Outside the post office I opened the envelope. I was expecting something terrible; I didn’t want anyone to see me if I started to cry out of frustration. Inside the envelope was a $50.00 money order. I was shocked! I never was able to determine who sent the money.

From that Christmas on, I have tried to give to others because that was the best Christmas I have ever had. It wasn’t the money that made such a difference in my life — it was a change in my attitude that made the difference. It was the gift from the heart that opened mine. Now I welcome those without family into my home at Christmas. I find a family who is less fortunate than mine and make sure they have a Christmas dinner and that each child has a special gift. My extended family and friends have joined in this adventure and have given up their gifts to provide for less fortunate families.

God has bestowed on all of us the gift of opening our hearts to others.

—TyAnne Unger, manager
Lincoln Manor Senior Housing
Rochelle
AS A SINGLE PARENT of four daughters in a tough economy, Ladweena knows what it’s like to be jobless, homeless and desperate.

Today, thanks in part to the Single Parent Program offered by Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) in Galesburg, Ladweena also knows how it feels to be successful in a job she loves.

“After I got divorced from my husband, I lost my job and my place to live,” says Ladweena, who had been in the program once before while she and her husband were separated.

“I came back to the program, and it’s been so helpful,” she adds. “My life is a lot less stressful than it was a few years ago.”

Through the Single Parent Program, Ladweena found job training and computer classes, all of which led to her current job as a telerecruiter for a regional blood center. “I’ve been there a whole year,” she says proudly. “Without this program, I probably wouldn’t even be working — especially not in a job that I love.”

Ladweena is just one of many success stories that have come out of the program, says Linda Crandall, coordinator of the Single Parent Program. “When we see people go from being dependent to being independent and self-sufficient, that’s what we call a success,” she explains.

The program, offered by LSSI for about 30 years, is open to residents of Knox or Warren Counties who are separated, divorced, widowed or have never been married. It’s open to both men and women, although the majority of participants are women.

“There are about 30 women in the program currently, which is about average for any one time,” Crandall says.
Self-Sufficiency

Single Parent Program participant Angela, with her son, Dennis, 3. "Being in the group has given me a lot more patience with my kids," she says.
Overcoming isolation

While the program offers weekly meetings, the free and confidential services also include personal goal-setting and home visits tailored to each individual. “We do individual assessments, and every parent is different,” Crandall says. “But we have seen a common thread among the people who need us. A lot of them are isolated.”

Many single parents turn to the program because they lack a support system, Crandall notes. “It could be they had poor parenting models or maybe they didn’t have any parents. Or maybe they had great parents, but they became parents themselves too soon. A lot of times, they lack education or job skills or parenting skills.” Participants in the program are sometimes referred through friends, the Department of Human Services, teachers or even the county health department.

Angela, 33, found the program about two years ago through a friend who continues to be involved in it as well. A mother of three children ranging in age from 3 to 14, Angela left the program for a while when she moved out of state, but quickly joined again when she came back.

“Being in the group has given me a lot more patience with my kids,” she says. “When I first came back [to Galesburg], I was pretty stressed out … But I talked to Linda about taking one step at a time … You find out there’s more people in the world going through the same thing you’re going through.”

During weekly meetings, Crandall and her assistant, Mary McGunnigal, cover such topics as parenting, money management, career moves, healthy relationships, stress and successful communication.

A focus on goals

Guest speakers are often invited to the meetings, which sometimes take place out in the community. Recently, Crandall arranged for participants to attend a session on résumés and cover letters at the Illinois Employment Training Center.

“They need to know what resources are out there in the community,” Crandall explains. I don’t want them to be dependent on LSSI for information. I want them to know where to go in the community to find out for themselves.”

Crandall focuses on creating meaningful educational experiences. Last year, she arranged for a few clients to receive an “extreme makeover” by cosmetology students at the Carl Sandburg Technology Center.

“They received haircuts and makeup consulting, and a couple of businesses in town offered them the opportunity to pick out job clothes. It really helped with their self-esteem by making them feel better about themselves,” Crandall says.

Helping clients learn to navigate public transportation rather than depend on rides is another way Crandall seeks to further their independence. “I found a donor who helped us get bus passes, and the city transit office matches us, so we get double the tickets,” Crandall says.

The program is heavily focused on finding employment, as well as parenting. “I think jobs are so important because they’re struggling to get stabilized in the home,” Crandall says. “If they have an income, then they don’t have to worry about the power getting shut off or having food to eat. We don’t want them to live from crisis to crisis.”

Each participant sets quarterly goals that are discussed and evaluated during home visits. “I feel like the home visits are our foundation,” Crandall says. “That’s where relationships are started. That’s where we build up trust.”

Tasha, a 32-year-old mother of six, says she looks forward to the home visits. “It’s a good time to talk about my goals,” she says.

Tasha is attending school now to earn her GED and hopes to become a cosmetologist someday. “I’ve always wanted to do that, and this program has given me the strength to do it,” she says.

As a new incentive this year, participants are being asked to sign a yearlong contract with points given for attending group meetings, accomplishing goals and participating in home visits.

“At the end of the quarter, they’ll receive rewards, such as a gift certificate, for having earned so many points,” Crandall says. She’s hoping the community will donate gift certificates to restaurants, grocery and department stores.

“I think that will be a good motivator,” Crandall says. “We have a heart for the program and what it can accomplish, but it takes clients’ participation to make it happen.”

Christine, 39, says the program was a lifesaver to her after she took her 4-year-old son and left an abusive marriage last spring. While Christine has a good job, she says she desperately needed help learning better techniques for parenting her “spirited child.”

“They lend me their ears when I’m frustrated and try to help me find solutions,” she said of Crandall and McGunnigal. “I’m so thankful we live in a community where programs like this are available.”

Not only does Christine feel more peace within herself now, she’s seen a big change in her son also. “It was nothing for him to punch me or kick me because he’d learned those behaviors from his father,” she says. “He doesn’t do that anymore We have a lot of work to do, but we’ve been successful.”

Brenda, 40, a mother of three with four grandchildren, plans to move to a Chicago suburb soon. Though sad to leave the program, she says she’ll take the skills she’s learned there with her.

For more information about the Single Parent Program call 309/343-7681.
Simple grassroots approach unites many voices

Your voice has an impact. Many voices, raised together, can make change happen. That’s the idea behind the grassroots efforts of Lutheran Network for Justice Advocacy (LNJA). LNJA works to make it easy for you to raise your voice to legislators on social justice issues that are important to you.

As an example of how this grassroots approach can affect legislators and their voting, look at the recent response to Congress’s plans to make funding cuts in federal programs, including food stamps, school lunch programs, Medicaid and Medicare, and Supplemental Security Income. At the same time, Congress proposed a $70 billion tax cut that would benefit the country’s wealthier citizens.

On October 18, LNJA released an Advocacy Alert to encourage its members to speak up about the injustice of these cuts. They — and many other people and organizations — did so, and the resolution was tabled, at least for a while.

One LNJA grassroots member provides a good testimonial of how easy it is to get involved in the network — and how participation can grow.

After the October 18 Alert was released, she e-mailed Pastor Daniel Schwick, director of LSSI’s Office of Government Relations and Advocacy, saying:

Thank you to you and others for nudging me [to] speak out. I know the effort it takes to get this note together and [to] send it to various networks (on all levels) requires staff time and energy. Unfortunately, it would not be necessary, if all of us took responsibility for understanding the issues and speaking up about them. I regret that nudging was necessary before I made the calls, this morning, to my U.S. senators and representative. I will also pass this note on to my colleagues at work.

Blessed days,
Diane Monroe

“I think this example shows the ease and the multiple effect that’s available through the Lutheran Network for Justice Advocacy,” Pr. Schwick says.

In a subsequent e-mail, Diane further explains how easy it is to get others involved in contacting legislators:

I serve on the Christian education team in the new Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission Unit [at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) office].... I coordinate the ELCA Christian Education (CE) Network comprised of synod CE leaders (rostered, lay, professional, volunteers); seminary professors of CE; resource center directors; and others. All but one of those people have e-mail, so it is a snap to pass on information.

Earlier this summer, I attended a brown bag lunch [at the ELCA office in Chicago] where I learned about e-advocacy. My new best friend! I tell everyone that the work is done for us — we don’t need to compose a letter (if we choose not to), eliminating the tendency to procrastinate. ... [T]he note you passed on this morning helped me identify the issue, reminded me who I needed to contact, gave me the facts and the language to use, and the most important outcome of this vehicle (in addition to the impact our voices will have on Washington) is that I am inspired to act and to encourage others to do the same, because I am assured that others will find the vehicle as easy and motivating as I have!

Blessings,
Diane

By joining together to raise our voices, we can make a difference and advocate for justice for all peoples of our country, whether they are rich or poor, in need or self-sustaining.

For more information about LSSI’s justice advocacy, please contact LNJA director, Pr. Daniel Schwick, at 847/390-1418 or Dan.Schwick@LSSI.org; or log onto LNJA’s Web site at www.LutheranAdvocacy.org.

If you have not yet signed up with LutheranAdvocacy.org, just go to the Web site and click on “sign up for the LNJA e-advocacy network.” The program will securely register your name and address by legislative districts so that you can be contacted when one of your representatives is a key vote on a piece of legislation. By registering on the Web site, you can also indicate what public policy issues you are most interested in following. Our advocacy alerts can then be more easily targeted to people who have an expressed interest in a particular policy issue.

The Lutheran Network for Justice Advocacy hopes that in the future LutheranAdvocacy.org will become a well-known and well-respected “brand” in public policy arenas in Illinois. The key to that happening, however, is in the number of Lutherans in Illinois who make the effort to become involved in justice advocacy. It’s time for us to stand up and claim our voice. That’s why LSSI and LNJA are, together, working for “healing, justice and wholeness for people and communities.”
T
he first young man arrives a few minutes early. He leans against the mortar of one of the many red brick buildings that defines his environment of walls, razor wire and fences at the Dixon Correctional Center (DCC). It’s hot in the afternoon sun and known to be stuffy inside with no air conditioning, but it doesn’t matter — he has more than a detached interest in being here. So, he waits, folded pass in hand, looking forward to the meeting of the bi-monthly Thursday Ministry program for inmates.

Soon, a dozen other uniformed inmates in “prison blues,” and a few volunteers in street clothes from outside the gates, converge. The door is unlocked by the staff member who accompanies the group, the passes acknowledged, and all file into an activity area that some of the prisoners compare to their old Sunday school rooms. For the next 90 minutes, the four volunteers who have come this particular Thursday will chat with the inmates as friends. Some have known each other for years. They will help the men complete a craft project and share their faith through Bible verses and devotions, inspiration and example. The visitors promise another group of volunteers will come again in two more weeks, and the men count on it. One of the prisoners describes the volunteers as “an awesome family.”

The Thursday Ministry was organized 14 years ago by the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (WELCA). Its original purpose was to share God’s love and word with the women prisoners who were incarcerated at Dixon Correctional Center. There wasn’t anything like it in place for male inmates at that time. Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) began managing the program in 1998. When the women were transferred out of the Dixon facility in 2001, the prison administration agreed to let the volunteers continue sharing their faith with a group of male inmates housed away from the general prison population. According to Jane Otte, executive director of LSSI’s Prisoner and Family Ministry, “The Thursday Ministry is a unique way to create community with prisoners and to see Christ in the stranger.”
Betty Stralow, program coordinator, was the individual who pushed for the men’s group when the women left DCC. As program coordinator, Stralow recruits volunteers not only for the Thursday Ministry but also for the Storybook Project — a volunteer program that enables inmates to read to their children on tape and send those recordings to them. Earlier, she’d participated in prison ministry through Bethesda Lutheran Church in Morrison. She also keeps track of approximately 34 men and women from 10 surrounding communities that make this unique ministry a priority.

“Chaplains, ministers and people from other churches come in and do Bible studies and prayer groups for the general population of the prison,” Betty says. “But the Thursday group of men is segregated from the general population because prison administrators identify them as people who might be victimized by other prisoners. Some are depressed or in anger management classes or on certain medications. The prison asked us to work with them because they knew we could handle them.”

Betty speaks of the misconceptions that some people have about inmates and their connection to faith.

“People think prisoners have no knowledge of church and hymns, or won’t sing. But they do! It’s good to see them grow in Christian faith,” she says.

Leona and Carl Nelson volunteer as a couple. Leona began with the women prisoners in 1991, and Carl helped her deliver 400 Easter baskets filled with religious brochures, candy and homemade cookies for the next five years. He officially started with the men’s program in 2001.

“The women were so thrilled to get some kind of little gift,” Carl says. “But I was concerned if the men could benefit.”

Leona said she was apprehensive in the early years. “We probably tried to overcompensate, show them we’re non-judgmental. We wanted them to [accept] us. With the women, we could bring in snacks and beverages and talk one-on-one with a prisoner while doing a craft,” she says.

The men choose their seats and pick out a blue square of material and some magic markers. Today’s craft will eventually become a quilt and be donated to Lutheran World Relief. There have been other wall hangings and impressive artwork created in this room, including a church banner with their handprints and “All God’s Children” written across the top.

Before the afternoon is over, there will be singing, word puzzles, scripture readings and good conversation.

The inmates talk comfortably with Betty, Leona, Carl and Tom Mahon, a retired schoolteacher who also volunteers on Thursday. And they talk about the program.

One man who calls himself “Elvis” has been coming since it started.

“There are five things I like about this program. I recommend people come every time. I get a lot of spiritual inspiration and love, especially when we do projects,” he says.

Another inmate, John, thinks it’s a blessing to have the volunteers visit them.

“When I was young, I went to a Methodist church and could say the books of the New Testament. This reminds me of Matthew 25 — ‘When I was in prison, you visited me.’”

John enjoys their other projects as well, making cards and making plastic stained glass items. He also sings in the choir now, every Sunday.

Rick has participated for two years. “People take time to share the word of God and make it enjoyable. It’s one of the most positive programs and outlets here.”

Roberta, the corrections recreation specialist, agrees.

“Anytime we can get people in from the community, a good program has value. People like Betty get the word out [that] these inmates are people. Depending on what hat they wear, people can forget these are our brothers and sisters,” she said.

“More volunteers are always needed for the program,” Betty says. “We all receive more than we give.”

For information on volunteering, contact Betty Stralow at 815/772-2387 or Bettypfm@yahoo.com.
On a sunny morning in late August, members of the Bill family and their friends spill into a hallway on the second floor of the Peoria County Courthouse on Jefferson, near the two courtrooms where adoptions are made official. The family and their considerable entourage are here to finalize the adoptions of Shaun and Kim Bills’ foster children, Christopher, 5, and Sophie, 3.

Among the first to arrive are Grandma and Grandpa Bill (Marcia and Tom or “Pop”) and Grandma and Grandpa Fudge (Charlie and Sue). Shaun and Kim follow with Chris and Sophia, all dressed up in their best — Chris looking sharp in a sweater vest and tie, and a pigtailed Sophie, beaming in a rickrack-trimmed gingham dress. Kim carefully pins a daisy — courtesy of Uncle Chuck and Aunt Dawn — on each child, and presents the children with their adoption gifts from Grandma and Grandpa Fudge — a gold pocket watch for Chris and a delicate cross for Sophie. Tia and Keenan received the same gifts on their “Gotcha Day.”

Shaun and Kim had to straighten out some DCFS (Department of Children and Family Services) subsidy issues for Chris before they could proceed with Adoption Day. It was important to Chris that they share the day with Sophie. “I want ‘Gotcha Day’ with Sophie because I don’t want her to be the only one not adopted,” she remembers him saying. “All Chris wanted for his birthday was to get adopted,” says Kim, whose birthday is exactly one week from today.

And for the last several weeks, Sophie has been walking around telling strangers, “I getting adopted.”

Lynn Goffinet, associate executive director of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois’ (LSSI’s) Children’s Community Services and statewide adoption director, greets Chris and Sophie and says, “This is one of those things you just don’t miss. … I circled it in red on...
friends just to share in the day. The people at Lutheran [Social Services of Illinois] have worked so hard for us. I know it’s kind of neat for Lynn and the caseworkers to see it completed.”  

“Our families have been through this with us through good times and bad,” explains Shaun. “We aren’t alone here. This is part of their reward. This is what makes being a grandparent cool.”  

At 10:30, the 17-member group, along with one dear friend who’s there from a distance, enters the courtroom of the Honorable Richard L. Grawey. This isn’t the first time the Bill family has been in Grawey’s chambers. They were there on May 23, 2001, when they’d adopted Tia and Keenan, who are now 10 and 9. Chris came into the Bills’ home in October 2002. Sophie followed one year later. All four of the children have a variety of special needs, having had very difficult beginnings where they experienced abuse and neglect.  

Pleased to see the family flanked by their loved ones and other friends, the judge greets the group.  

“You’re all part of the village,” Grawey says. “You’re all part of the reason it makes it possible to raise one or two or three or four children.”  

“We have a partial village and two children who were adopted [a few years ago here],” notes John T. Brady, the Bill’s lawyer, referring to Tia and Keenan.  

“The adoption proceedings are [a judge’s] happiest proceedings . . . ,” Grawey continues. “It’s wonderful to see you back again. I would ask Mr. and Mrs. Bill to face the clerk.”  

After being sworn in, the judge runs through a number of questions, first with Kim, and then Shaun.  

“Have you previously filed a petition for adoption?”  

“Have [the children] been examined by a pediatrician?”  

“Do you understand that this is a subsidized adoption under DCFS?”  

“Do you understand that we are here today to seek a legal adoption? In real old-fashioned language — this is forever,” Grawey adds, noting the weight of the proceedings.  

“Is it still your desire to proceed with the adoption?”  

After Kim and Shaun answer all questions in the affirmative, Grawey announces, “I will grant the order of adoption. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to grant this adoption.” He bangs the gavel, and Chris and Sophie are now officially members of the
Bill family.

Kim pulls out hockey jerseys especially made for this day and slips them on Chris and Sophie. On the front, they read “Bills, Bills and More Bills” and on the back, “Sophia 2 1/2” and “Christopher 5.”

Time for an official picture of the newly completed family. Photos are snapped of Grawey with Shaun, Kim, Tia, Keenan, Chris and Sophie holding a poster-sized picture of Shaun’s best friend, Tom, eating ice cream. Known by the kids as “Uncle Tom,” Tom is serving in Iraq with the Illinois National Guard. Shaun has known him since fifth grade and they are “like brothers,” he says.

After the proceedings, the family gathers in the hallway outside the courtroom for a reading of a poem Shaun’s dad “Pop” — himself adopted — wrote about adoption back in 1990. He read it in 2001 when Tia and Keenan were adopted and remembers shedding some tears that day.

“I’ll try to hold it together this time,” Pop says and reads:

Adopted kids are special kids
They’re hand-picked — sent from God
For special parents full of love
Who receive that special nod
To give them hope and fill their dreams
And give their life a plan
All custom made into a family
A gift by God’s own hand

Pastor Jeff Kelley and wife Nora, from the Bill’s parish, Morton United Methodist, follows with a prayer. The entire group holds hands.

Pr. Kelley opens, saying, “This is a neat family. This is a hard-working family with a lot of family support. We’ll all leave crying, won’t we?”

“ Their perspective is what makes them special,” says Goffinet, of Shaun and Kim. “They [adopted] because they believed they could be a family, provide a home to children who need parents,” she explains. “They’re totally invested in meeting the needs of [Tia, Keenan, Chris and Sophie]. They have the ability, the commitment. They know when you adopt a child who’s been abused and neglected, they’re going to have issues. They’re committed to addressing those issues and helping them in any way possible to become the best [people] they can be.”

The group then processes down to the courthouse basement to sign the final paperwork. Shaun lifts Chris and Sophie up on the counter to watch (ironically, right near a sign that says “Small Claims” — Shaun points to it, and then Sophie, laughing). A few signatures and it’s officially official. All the kids are itching to get to their favorite ice cream parlor, part of the Adoption Day ritual, something that originated when Shaun’s dad and brother were adopted in 1959.

“There you are,” says Brady, the attorney who helped the Bills to make their family complete, handing the family the adoption papers. “You are all done, except for the ice cream.”

Kim smiles and says to Brady, “This is the last time we’re using you.”

“I think it’s party time,” says Brady. “I’m glad everybody could be here for it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kim replies.

Grandma Sue exclaims, “Ice cream’s in order!”

“I think of these kids as a gift to Shaun and Kim,” says Pop. “For a moment, I wondered what they would grow up to become. It was the happiness in Chris and Sophie’s eyes that whispered, ‘This is the right thing to do.’”

Clockwise, from left: Chris, Kim, Judge Richard Grawey, Keenan, Tia, Shaun and Sophie, along with a poster of “Uncle Tom,” Shaun’s best friend who is serving in Iraq.
What Adoption Day Means: Now We Know They’re Ours

“… I think of adoption day [as] completion,” says Kim Bill, reflecting on her family’s experiences with what is also known as “Gotcha Day.” “We’re done. Our family’s complete. [There’s] relief — there’s nothing that’s gonna keep us from being a family now.”

“Adoption Day #1 was great,” adds Shaun, referring to that day in May 2001 when the couple adopted Tia and Keenan. “Adoption Day #2 was a lot different. We knew what to expect, so there weren’t the nerves.”

“… I really felt that I was at the end of a good book,” he explains. “Tia and Keenan were Part One of the book, and Chris and Sophie [are] Part Two. … Beyond that relief, though, was the knowledge that the next day, I would pick up the next book in the series.”

“Adoption,” says Lynn Goffinet, associate executive director of Children’s Community Services and statewide adoption coordinator at LSSI, “symbolizes the beginning of a whole new identity for the children [as well as] the beginning of a new family that includes both their birth and adoptive families. While they may have integrated that child into the family, it’s not official until the finalization.” She notes that for many families, until the judge bangs the gavel, there is always a lurking fear that things may not work out.

Shaun’s dad, Tom Bill, who, along with his brother, was adopted in 1959 at the age of 11, has a different perspective. “Tia and Keenan’s adoption was very special to me,” he says. “I understood the tremendous bond and determination to keeping them together. … I witnessed two kids who were literally taken off the streets, who were abused and neglected, become two kids who are loved deeply. Both have gone through more in their short lives than many people will ever experience. I saw two kids who were willing to reach out and trust one more time in hopes of finding love and a place they could call home.”

Sue Fudge, Kim’s mother, says, “[Adoption Day] was an emotional day. Very emotional. Now we know they’re ours.” She qualifies that by saying, “They’ve been our grandchildren since Day One. They’ve been our grandchildren since they walked into Shaun and Kim’s house. We’re very fortunate to have those four children in our lives.”

“Adoption Day was a very moving experience for me, and I must admit I shed a few tears in the process,” says Tom. “It was a renewal for me, as well as a happy experience for all of us. Adoption doesn’t just touch the heart of a person; it touches their soul. It goes much deeper than people [who haven’t experienced it] can understand. You have to experience it firsthand to know its depth, to know its joy, and to feel, once again, you belong to a family.”

For information on adoption, visit www.AdoptionIllinois.org, LSSI’s adoption Web site.

The “Bills of Summer” (from left): Tom “Pop,” Chris and Shaun Bill at a Cubs game.
Keeping Families Intact

Program Helps Mothers Overcome Addictions and Become Better Parents

Raegan Carpenter, child welfare specialist with LSSI's Intact Family Recovery-South (left), meets with IFR participant Lisa, with daughter Sierra nearby. Intact caseworkers like Carpenter play an important role in their clients’ success by establishing a positive, encouraging relationship and by offering advocacy and support as participants like Lisa take the steps necessary to change and keep their children safe.
“WHEN I LOOKED INTO MY BABY’S EYES, I knew I had to stop — I had to get it together,” Melanie recalls thinking. She knew that if she didn’t stop, she could lose custody of her infant son.

That turning point occurred while Melanie was participating in a substance abuse treatment program. Two months earlier, Melanie had given birth to her son, who was exposed to cocaine and marijuana due to Melanie’s drug use early in her pregnancy. After discovering traces of drugs in her newborn son’s meconium, hospital personnel contacted the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) child abuse hotline, as mandated by state law. DCFS then referred Melanie’s case to Intact Family Recovery (IFR), a program of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), where her journey of recovery began.

At first the journey was rocky. Melanie initially fought the program. She lied, saying she no longer used. Even after attending a class and learning about the harmful effects of drugs on her body, Melanie could not curb her addiction. But after realizing she had an open DCFS case and could possibly lose custody of her son to the juvenile welfare justice system if she continued using, Melanie decided to make a change.

The day after completing 45 days in a substance abuse treatment facility, Melanie reported to an LSSI outpatient program. “From that point on, everything started taking off,” recalls Willie Sanders, Melanie’s LSSI caseworker. “She had no positive drops (urine drug tests). She attended meetings — she bought into the program.”

One of the goals of LSSI’s Intact Family Recovery program is to identify barriers that may
prevent parents from being successful in their recovery. Melanie’s barriers included her circle of friends, who supplied her with drugs, and her lack of a high school diploma.

“Melanie left the treatment center understanding she could no longer hang out with her friends who continued to do drugs,” Sanders says. “She made that change and hasn’t looked back since.” With encouragement from Sanders, Melanie decided to pursue taking the graduate equivalency diploma (GED) test. She now has plans to enroll in a medical assistant program in the near future, with the hope of eventually working in a hospital emergency room setting.

A high success rate

Melanie is among hundreds of mothers who have successfully completed LSSI’s Intact Family Recovery program since it began in 1998. Michele Ware, senior supervisor, Intact Family Recovery-South, says the length of the program — 18 to 24 months — is one reason the program has an 85 to 90 percent success rate. “That allows time for moms to address their issues of addiction and begin living life in recovery,” she says.

Ware says the program also succeeds because of the partnership between Intact’s child welfare workers and specialists from local Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) agencies. “Having experts working alongside us who are assigned to every case with us, makes it easier for us to provide comprehensive services,” she says.

For example, Intact child welfare specialists work with families on issues related to the safety and well-being of their children. They connect parents to community services and work to remove any economic, social or family-related barriers that would prevent them from being successful in their recovery. Intact child welfare specialists also advocate on behalf of clients on such issues as housing, healthcare benefits, children’s education and public aid. Specialists from AOD agencies work with mothers in helping them become — and remain — substance free by providing links to drug treatment and mental health services.

Coming to terms with the pain

Ware says mothers are often in denial about their addiction. “The hardest part is getting them to a point where they acknowledge they have a problem,” she says. “Once we get there, we usually make a lot of progress.”

Deanna has made progress since entering LSSI’s IFR program after her 16-month-old daughter was born exposed to cocaine and marijuana. “It was hard for me at first — the program didn’t make sense,” Deanna recalls. “I didn’t want to cooperate. I didn’t want to interact with anyone.”

But after coming to terms with her addiction, Deanna’s attitude changed. “I realized I was in the program because of what I did while I was pregnant,” she says. “Once I accepted responsibility for the part I played, it became easier. I decided to accept it and move on.” Deanna decided to “buckle down and get with the program. … I wanted to show them how smart, independent and self-sufficient I really was,” she says.

Part of Deanna’s recovery included coming to terms with a painful past, including the death of one of her children, living in an abusive relationship and being raped while living in a foster home as a teenager.

Ware says mothers in the Intact Family Recovery program have often gone through earlier traumas that need to be addressed. “Thus we find the pain that they’ve been trying to mask with self-medication,” she says. “A lot of moms have been raped, and sexually, physically and emotionally abused throughout their lifetimes. Many have experienced a great deal of loss that they’ve never addressed. Once we can get through to where the pain is, we can make more progress.”

Strengthening clients’ support system

Intact caseworkers can make referrals to community
resources, including therapists and counselors, to provide clients with needed support. “That’s key,” Ware says. “We want to provide clients with services in their community so [that] once we are gone, they still have access to those services.”

Julie Hanson, senior supervisor, Intact Family Recovery-North, says caseworkers may also work on strengthening extended family support for clients. “Sometimes people with a substance-abuse problem have burned bridges in their families, so we facilitate a family meeting with the client and extended family members to see if they can support the client and resolve some of their issues,” she says.

“If her family is not willing, we urge the client to develop other support systems, through church, AA meetings or mothers’ support groups, before we close the case.”

Ware says that during the two years mothers are in the IFR program, they go from being seriously addicted to becoming self-sufficient, employed or in school. “They begin to see themselves as worthwhile people who can achieve things,” she says. “It’s amazing the impact that has on their children.”

Lisa, another program alumna, says she never wants to return to a life of drinking and doing drugs. She says she already gets a “natural high,” spending time with her children and planning for her future.

Intact Family Services

LSSI also operates Intact Family Services, a broader program that receives referrals from DCFS for cases of abuse and neglect. In these cases, abuse and neglect are not severe enough to warrant protective custody of children, and parents are willing to work to make needed changes. Intact Family Services caseworkers meet with families weekly, assess their needs, monitor the safety of the children, and make a service plan that focuses on goals and tasks.

Hanson says both of LSSI’s Intact programs prevent children from unnecessarily going into foster care. “The tie of a birth family is really strong,” she says. “If we can shore families up, empower them, and assist them with what they need, the children are going to be much better off in the long run.”

Things have looked up since Lisa successfully completed the Intact Family Recovery program. She passed the GED test with flying colors, plans on working soon and looks forward to watching her five children grow through the years.

“It’s been a bumpy ride, but I’ve learned so much,” she says. “I never want to go back out in the streets. I guess the fog has lifted, and there’s so much more now for me and my children.”

Lisa says that besides the birth of her children, the IFR program was one of the best things that has ever happened to her. “The program completely saved my life,” she says.

Melanie says her proudest moment took place when she successfully completed the IFR program, while still having custody of her son, who today is a happy, healthy toddler. She now looks forward to the enjoyment of watching her son grow. “I want to make sure he’s secure,” she says. “I want him to come to me and talk to me about what is going on. I want him to know I’ll always be there for him, no matter what.”

For more information about Intact Family Services or Intact Family Recovery, call 773/763-4720 (north office) or 773/372-2727 (south office), or visit www.LSSI.org.
Celebrating 10 Years of Building Homes

On October 5, representatives of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), Habitat for Humanity and IDOC School District 428 gathered in Springfield at the state fairgrounds for the final celebration of Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives’ 10th anniversary. The event was attended by all partners in the collaboration, including regional deputy directors, wardens, construction instructors and college coordinators. The invisible partners, prisoners who help create homes for low-income families, were there in spirit and in the words of those who spoke that day.

The celebration was hosted by Illinois Department of Corrections Director Roger E. Walker, Jr. In his greeting, Director Walker said that “Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives serves as an important component in the reentry management of inmates and also brings hope and dignity to communities through the building of Habitat for Humanity homes.”

Each year, Illinois prisoners work more than 14,000 hours to build walls and roof trusses that will be used in Habitat homes for low-income families. These men also gain valuable construction skills that can turn into careers after their release from prison.

Tom Zaborac, college coordinator for Illinois River Correctional Center, talked about the 16 men who built a modular home through Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives, noting that 12 of the 16 have left prison and are gainfully employed.

About the program, one prisoner wrote: “I have always thought I would have a career in a more academic field. … [But] there is so much more of an immediate effect in building someone a home than working … in an office … I now want this to be my life. I want to build homes, and I want to volunteer when I can to build for Habitat. I have a passion today that I’ve never had before, so thank you for what you’ve done to ignite it.”

Building Homes: Rebuilding Lives has provided homes to 55 out of the 102 counties in Illinois and worked with 47 out of the 50 Habitat for Humanity affiliates in the state. This year, the program contributed to its 300th home.

A New Home for PFM Programs

LSSI’s Re-Connections and Family Connections programs celebrated their new location at 2907 S. Wabash in Chicago with an Open House on September 9. The two programs, which work with women, children and caregivers involved with the justice system, are a part of LSSI’s Prisoner and Family Ministry (PFM).

Talking about the Visits to Mom/Visit to Dad program, Mary Sigler, warden of Dwight and Kankakee Correctional Centers, says, “LSSI has always been wonderful about [providing] transportation for children and trying to keep the connection for the families and the ladies who are in prison.”

Mike Rothwell, warden of the Sheridan Correctional Center, was also in attendance, as was Rick Herman, vice president and CEO of Wheat Ridge Ministries. Wheat Ridge “has been a wonderful partner for a really long time,” says Jane Otte, executive director of PFM.

LSSI President, the Rev. Dr. Frederick Aigner, blessed the new facility, saying, “We’re gonna bless this space, but it’s already blessed. Prisoner and Family Ministry is ‘the soul of the agency’ for us [LSSI], and we hope you can feel it.”

For more information on Family Connections and Re-Connections, call 312/567-9224 or visit www.LSSI.org.
Photos of four children in LSSI’s Foster Care program will be among those displayed in the state’s first professional photography exhibit of children available for adoption. An estimated 40 Illinois foster children will be included in the Heart Gallery, part of a traveling exhibit that opened November 4 at the Chicago Children’s Museum at Navy Pier. The gallery was on display at the Richard J. Daley Center in Chicago from November 14 through December 8, and will then travel around the state.

Visit http://heartgalleryofillinois.com for more information.

A “thank you” to foundations and organizations for their generous support of LSSI programs: Aileen S. Andrew Foundation $2,000; Dean L. and Rosemarie Buntrock Foundation $500; DuPage County Human Services $2,500; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America $1,074; Poshard Foundation for Abused Children $600; Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation $15,000; Rock Island Community Foundation $2,800; Sjostrom and Sons Foundation, Inc. $1,000; Target Foundation $2,500; The Herschel E. Rives Charitable Fund $5,130; The Kapoor Charitable Foundation $1,000; The Northern Trust Company Charitable Trust $10,000; Tom Russell Charitable Foundation, Inc. $5,000; and Wheat Ridge Ministries $10,500.

On November 5, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) honored Rotary International for its efforts in eradicating polio worldwide at the 24th Annual Amicus Certus (True Friend) Dinner Dance at the Four Seasons Hotel in Chicago. From left: Dick Johnson, event emcee and anchor of NBC-5 News Today; Serge Gouteyron, vice president of Rotary International; Nancy Nagel, president of LSSI’s Women’s Network, which organized the event; and the Rev. Dr. Frederick Aigner, LSSI president.

Katrina Spurs Charity Legislation

As a result of Hurricane Katrina, Congress passed federal legislation to encourage charitable giving not only to groups assisting hurricane victims but also to other charities, such as Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). Under the new law, any cash contributions to charities that are made by December 31, 2005, will be fully deductible, up to 100 percent of a donor’s adjusted gross income (AGI).

(Usually the “ceiling” on charitable deductions is 50 percent of a person’s AGI, with a five-year carryover period for excess deductions.)

In addition, people who are 59-1/2 years old and older may withdraw money from an IRA to make a gift that now will be offset 100 percent by charitable deductions. Through December 31, your deductions may completely eliminate your federal tax, no matter how high your federal taxable income.

This is an excellent time for friends of LSSI to make a special cash major gift for the Strength to Strength Campaign. For information, contact Peggie Imhauser at 847/635-4678 or Peggie.Imhauser@LSSI.org.
“[Robert and I] had been on almost every committee at Our Saviour’s [Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights] and thought it was time to do something else,” says Marilynn Mantell.

That “something else” turned out to be Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI).

Introduced to LSSI by Pastor Frederick Aigner, LSSI president and former senior pastor of their church, the Arlington Heights residents decided to put their efforts into “making people at Our Saviour’s more aware of LSSI.”

The Mantells created a “many-tiered” plan. They started by talking to the people who worked with children at the church, to encourage teachers to develop programs that would involve helping LSSI.

In their quest to help more people learn about LSSI, the Mantells recently held a “listening event” at their home. It was a small, informal gathering where friends they invited heard about LSSI’s services and ways they could, if they later chose to, make meaningful gifts.

“Our intent is to have people from that event [hold] their own meetings,” Bob explains.

Sister Pat Davis, who works with Family Connections, spoke about Prisoner and Family Ministry programs at the gathering.

A special part of the event was Bob’s own testimony. A little over a month earlier, his mother had moved to St. Matthew Center for Health in Park Ridge, an LSSI program. His father had died, and he wasn’t sure of the best way to provide his mother with the care that she needed.

“Pr. Aigner helped us [place Mom at St. Matthew], and St. Matt’s is now part of our lives,” Bob says.

Although the couple continues to be active in their church, “we just feel the need to work for LSSI,” Marilynn says. “I guess you could just say we feel the call [to do so].”

Bob, who is a member of The Cornerstone Foundation board, says, “The organization has so much to offer on a personal level, if you want to use your talent.”

Marilyn says, “[Supporting LSSI] is something that we can do together, that we can share. We can combine our strengths. …”

“You can’t be small and be involved with LSSI,” Bob says. “Somehow, [working with LSSI] makes you bigger.”

“Our People, Our Strength” is a series of profiles about individuals who help LSSI fulfill its mission of bringing healing, justice and wholeness to people and communities.