

Rocky Mountain News

At Mountain Resource Center, neighbors help neighbors

By **Jean Torkelson**, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Published January 26, 2009 at 12:05 a.m.



Photo by Javier Manzano / The Rocky

At the end of a parenting class hosted by the Mountain Resource Center in Conifer this month, 3-year-old Logan Goodridge, center, skips around the room as Alex Hancey, 4, at right, watches.

The Mountain Resource Center in Conifer is a little like the old village square - the place where people in a crisis can go to get help from their neighbors.

The nonprofit center, situated in a homey, chalet-style building, opened in 1992 to serve the mountain communities of west Jefferson and east Park counties.

It links someone in need with the appropriate

agency, business, nonprofit or individual who can help. As the economy worsens, the center is bracing to assist ordinarily self-sufficient people who never expected to be unemployed or budget-strained.

In an interview, Executive Director Sharon Schrage talks about the work of the center, which has applied for a Season to Share grant. Her comments have been edited for space and clarity.

You worked for the YMCA organization for many years; what attracted you to the Mountain Resource Center?

I've lived in the Conifer area for 20 years, so it was a matter of using my skills and talents in my own community. It's like getting back to mission work, to the basics. It's about the quality of life, about what really happens in life. Crisis can happen to any of us. It's not just something that happens to people in low-income circumstances. None of us is prepared for terminal illness, a death in the family, a loss of career or a job. I feel blessed to work for an organization that recognizes that.

How does the center work?

We like to say we're neighbors helping neighbors. Our mission is to identify the many resources that are available and match them to the need. That may be a government agency or a private business, or volunteers with expertise in, say, financial issues or job searching or computer skills.

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Or sometimes we're the family support system that people don't have, perhaps the support system for an elderly person or someone with a mental illness.

We're open to anybody. Sometimes the need is just to have a sounding board - we're here for that, too. A person might not walk out of here with financial help; what they really needed was a plan to tackle whatever life has thrown at them.

What does "need" look like in a mountain community rather than, say, in urban Denver?

We don't have a lot of ethnic diversity; what we have is income diversity. You see everything, from million-dollar homes to shabby cabins. Some people seem to have the perfect life, but they've lived beyond their means and lost their job. At the other end of the scale, some people don't have electricity.

A rural community can be very isolating because of the distance between homes, and there aren't as many services available close to home. For example, some people drive 50 miles to the nearest grocery store. There are a lot of retirees, and now, as the years have passed, perhaps they're not as mobile as before.

Or maybe they're young families hit by the economy; now they need a new job. But there's not a lot of full-time jobs up here or mass transit to get to them.

So the question is, what services or programs can

we work together to find for you, to help meet your needs?

These are extraordinary economic times. How does that change what you do?

We're all about empowerment. It's just magnified now because we have a whole new layer of families who were doing OK and now, between the price of gas or food or loss of jobs, they're falling below that sustainability line.

It's hitting everybody somehow. What changes us, is that, absolutely, our resources are stretched as much as they have ever been.

We're trying to work with more people with bigger needs and the same amount of funding. And we don't see an end in sight.

When you think about how the center will respond to the coming year, what keeps you up at night?

As I try to be optimistic, I can't expect a drop in funding when our needs are growing. *That's* what keeps me up at night! I'm counting on the generosity and goodwill of the community and anyone who's in a position to be able to help us with our growing demands.

Mountain Resource Center

* **Mission:** To identify, advocate and provide health and human services and education for mountain-area residents.

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- * **Founded:** 1992
- * **People helped:** 9,551 in 2007
- * **Staff:** 10 full-time equivalent
- * **Volunteers:** 450-plus
- * **Budget:** \$700,000
- * **Web site:** www.mrcco.org

How to donate

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Post-News Season to Share, a McCormick Foundation Fund, gave more than \$2.1 million last year to 65 agencies serving disadvantaged children, as well as people who are hungry, homeless or in need of medical care. Donations are matched at 50 cents for each dollar, and 100 percent of all donations, plus the match, goes directly to local nonprofit agencies.

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To donate:

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