



COMMUNITIES » West Side



Nancy Rodriguez, a teacher at Belle Center on Maryland Street, serves lunch to preschoolers as new programs offer a variety of services to neighborhood residents ranging from infants and their parents to senior citizens. Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News

'Cradle to college' where need is dire Belle Center's ever-expanding programs are sources of increasing hope on West Side

By **DIEDRE WILLIAMS**
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Life can be tough for a single mother with no high school diploma, no job and no connections.

But at the Belle Center, mothers facing some or all of those challenges now have more opportunities. The human services center has added at least a dozen new programs in recent years for men, women and children on Buffalo's West Side.

There a mother can work on getting her GED or take classes in English as a Second Language. Her baby can be nearby in the on-site day care program. And as the infant grows, he or she can attend a range of day care and after-school programs all the way through high school and beyond.

Meanwhile, if the mom signs up at Buffalo AmeriCorps' on-site office, it can help cover her day care costs, put some money in her pocket and provide tuition assistance if she plans to attend college. In return, she will perform services such as tutoring or landscaping to gain experience.

"We can take them from cradle to college," said Belle Center Executive Director Nestor Hernandez.

Gabriela Bauzo, 8, has been enrolled in child care at the Maryland Street center since she was about a year old, said her mother, Betzaida Rodriguez, 30, a native of Puerto Rico. Gabriela, whose primary language was Spanish, needed a lot of help with math and reading and came to the Belle Center after classes every day to work with tutors.

A third-grader now, Gabriela earned an 83 average in the first marking period and has raised it to 86. And her grades in reading have risen from 72 last semester to 85.

"For me, I work full time, and having that extra hand is good. When they come in from school, they sit down with the AmeriCorps volunteers and do homework. They were very helpful. Right now, I'm like, "Thank you!" Rodriguez said.

In another part of the center, 73-year-old Ophelia Brown, of Trenton Avenue, comes for the senior citizens programs, including field trips to places such as Walmart and grocery stores, as well for the hot, nutritious lunch served every day.

"I like it here," she said.

They are among the increasing number of people who use the center, which has seen its budget nearly triple as it offers more and more services in one of the poorest parts of the city.

When he took charge in 2006, he had a handful of staff and an operational budget of about \$540,000, said Hernandez, a military veteran who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The center was getting about 1,000 visits a month for offerings such as GED courses, computer literacy training, a senior citizens program and an after-school drop-in center.

Today, the center employs 20 full-time workers and 18 part-timers. It now gets about 7,000 visits a month thanks to a variety of added services, including a food pantry, more programs for senior citizens and ESL classes. It became an emergency warming shelter in late 2009, and it now collaborates with the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority's family support services program, offering all of the Belle Center programs.

In 2009, two rooms were added to the day care wing to accommodate toddlers and prekindergartners. The operational budget has nearly tripled, to \$1.4 million, and the business plan envisions a charter school in perhaps a few years. A feasibility study is being considered now, said Hernandez, who, upon returning from Iraq, saw a need for the services and convinced the center's board of his vision for the future.

The agency's target area -- bounded by Virginia Street, West and Porter avenues and Perry Boulevard -- is among the most challenging in the city. It's a neighborhoods where 77 percent of residents qualify as low-to-moderate income, 39 percent lack a high school diploma, 70 percent of children live in a single-parent home, and 19 percent of adults have less than a ninth-grade education.

The area is 45 percent Hispanic, 26 percent African-American and 39 percent white, Hernandez said, adding that many of the residents are refugees.

Other center services added in the last few years include:

* Buffalo AmeriCorps, whose members began service in 2007. (The program is not affiliated with the troubled Western New York AmeriCorps.) The 31 workers have removed graffiti, cleaned 34 empty lots -- three of which became community gardens -- and planted 600 trees to replace ones lost in the 2006 October Surprise snowstorm. They tutor children, work in the food pantry and have accompanied law enforcement and city officials on 60 Clean Sweeps and shoveled snow for 400 senior citizens and disabled people this past winter.

Some, like 23-year-old Sudanese native Janaro Akin, can get a job at the community center once they finish their AmeriCorps service.

"For me, [Buffalo AmeriCorps] was a good thing," said Akin, a full-time student at Canisius College who is studying political science. "They were always involved with everything we did. They connected with you and motivated us to do better."

* The Early Childhood Center, which is open to children six weeks to 4 years old. The program started in January 2010, and 16 infants, 24 toddlers and 45 preschoolers are currently enrolled.

* The Parent-Child Home Program, which is in its first year and involves home visits twice a week to help 25 families with young children overcome language barriers through a bilingual staff of five.

"[A child's] first years are very important," said Nina Kean, program coordinator.

* Elementary School Age Child Care (SACC), which opened last year, includes after-school activities and a summer camp for 135 children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Homework is the first activity the kids do when they arrive, said program director James McNeil. It is fee-based, but no child is turned away, McNeil said.

* The free 21st Century Program for middle and high school students began in 2008 and has about 70 students working on homework or ELA exam preparation, said program director Evelyn Pizarro, a retired Buffalo Public Schools teacher.

"They have to do more than play basketball or other recreation," she said.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Erie County also offers a mentoring program at the Belle Center, and Buffalo AmeriCorps' Portal Program guides those 17 and older into educational or career paths and takes them on college tours. The center also has a new asthma-screening program with D'Youville College nursing students to address the fact that the neighborhood has the highest incidence of asthma in the city, said Alexis Soto-Colorado, who runs the program.

Belle Center marketing director Callie Johnson summarized the center's progress by saying, "Things have changed quite a bit around here."

dwilliams@buffnews.com