

## Local nonprofits join forces to better serve people in need

By CHRIS KEEGAN  
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WESTERLY — When a crisis like job loss hits home, its weight can be quick and crushing — especially in the cold of winter. Once-proud providers are left asking questions that once seemed improbable.

How am I going to put food on the table, pay the gas bill and afford rent? How much will it cost to make a trip to the doctor's office without health insurance, and what if the kids get sick? Who's going to care for dad if his condition worsens?

Four local nonprofit groups have banded together to pool their resources and maintain a referral network for those in the community who are facing the challenges that come with personal crises. Organized under the umbrella of a "Commitment to Change," the collaborative includes the Bradford Jonnycake Center of Westerly, the WARM Center, Westerly Adult Day Services Inc. and Wood River Health Services of Hope Valley.

The groups recently received a three-year, \$75,000 grant from the United Way that will put case managers at three of the facilities through 2012. Two full-time

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staffers are currently employed at Wood River Health Services and the WARM Center, while a third part-time employee is working at the Jonnycake Center.

The case managers will serve as common links to resources between all four organizations, and help steer those in need toward opportunities for greater self-sufficiency.

"A case manager is a person someone would go to for help with multiple problems," said Linda Cardillo, Wood River

Health's executive director. "Rarely it's one problem. It starts with one, like losing a job, and little by little they lose everything else."

"The collaboration itself is just trying to keep people from falling through the cracks," added Kelly Lee, executive director of Westerly Adult Day Services. "To me, that's it in a nutshell. In Westerly, it's unique because nonprofit, social service agencies work really well together. I think that says a lot about our community and the people who live here."

Each of the four groups represents its own area of expertise — and have their own challenges to work around as high unemployment and the state's sinking economy create ripple effects through local communities.

"We're taking the approach [that] everybody specializes in something different," said Claire Letizio, director of the Jonnycake Center. "We're using the skills that everyone brings to the table to service those in need. I see it as an essential part of human services. Without case management, you can put a Band-Aid on a situation, but you can never get to the root of it."

WARM Center Executive Director Jean Barry agreed.

"We wanted to maximize our resources to help people in need," she said. "That's been the mission and the goal: to work together to identify needs in the community that are not being served, and try to do something about it. It's so important that we talk to each other on an ongoing basis. Resources are so limited."

While the groups' directors have been meeting regularly since 2004, Lee said the collaborative represents a new way to attract charitable do-

nations at a time when state and local aid is threatened by budget cuts.

"It's really unheard of, especially in this [economic] climate. We don't try to compete with each other," she said. "We're a small community, and there's only so many philanthropic dollars to go around. Respect and trust is a key ingredient to this collaborative."

Letizio, a longtime social worker, said case management is a critical support tool that produces results.

"What it has done for us is allowed us to collaborate with other organizations to meet the needs of our clientele," she said. "There's no better way of understanding where a person or family is at the moment, what resources they're connected to and what resources they're not connected to."

"Some might find themselves in temporary situations due to a death, sickness, loss of income or a job, and don't know what resources are out there. The case manager keeps them from making the same situation happen again and again ... The clients take ownership and get themselves back into self-dependence, and are able to use the tools the case managers teach them," Letizio said.

The collaborative plans to report case outcomes to the United Way on a monthly basis, Cardillo said.

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*Directors of all four agencies will be writing editorial content to appear in future editions of The Sun, beginning Sunday, as part of a coordinated public awareness campaign.*

