



Long Running Faith in Action Project Changes with the Times

One of the first *Faith in Action* projects, located in Boston, has survived, struggled and sometimes thrived since its initial funding in 1983.

The project, called Match-Up, received its \$150,000, three-year funding under *Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers Program (Faith in Action, Phase 1)* between 1984 and 1987 (ID# 009308).

In April 2008, project director Janet Seckel-Cerrotti, who has been with the project from the start, described an organization that has shifted, moved, almost gone out of business, but kept its core mission: to help homebound elderly people with services that no one else was providing.

One of the core tenets of the *Faith in Action* program is that groups of congregations can band together to help people in need over the long term. To Seckel-Cerrotti's surprise, that was much more difficult than she had anticipated.

Difficulty Securing Congregations' Assistance

While many congregations signed agreements to participate in the project, few followed through, she said. Not many congregations set up coordinators to organize volunteers to provide care. Few clergy provided referrals of elders in their congregation who might need a visit or some help in their homes, Seckel-Cerrotti said.

"My analysis of congregational involvement was that most congregations are pretty good at helping people through an acute illness," she said. "Someone goes to the hospital, has surgery and gets a lot of help from the congregation. It's the people who are sick for months or years at a time who become socially separated from the congregation. They get lost within the congregation."

In spite of those challenges, Seckel-Cerrotti and others established a project that over the next few years gained traction in the community. The project provided friendly visits to elders, transportation to the grocery store and doctor's appointments and advocacy when elders had trouble with landlords, health insurance or other issues.

Making it on Their Own

The project continued to operate following the end of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funding in 1986 with funding from a variety of other sources including United Way and funds that the Boston Aging Center, where the project was housed, raised on behalf of the project. But in 1991, the Boston Aging Center decided that the project was no longer viable and gave the staff three months to move out.

"We could close, merge with another organization or try and make it on our own," Seckel-Cerrotti said. "We decided that a lot of people were depending on us. Maybe because of ego or maybe because we thought we might be swallowed up by another agency, we decided to go independent."

In December 1991, the organization was incorporated as *Match-Up Interfaith Volunteers*. From that time until 2008, when Seckel-Cerrotti was interviewed for this report, Match-Up organized services to homebound elderly from an assortment of spaces in Boston, including a pink boiler room in a nursing home.

Seeking to Serve Diverse Elders

Throughout the years, the project worked to reach diverse groups, Seckel-Cerrotti said. In June 1998, Match-Up received a second RWJF *Faith in Action* grant to start a project in Roxbury, a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Boston. The project was run from a neighborhood church, Charles Street A.M.E., and had a separate project director based there to organize the volunteers. RWJF supported the project with a grant of \$25,000 between 1998 and 1999 (ID# 034757).

At the end of the 18-month grant in December 1999, the project, called the Roxbury Care Senior Program, became an ongoing function of the host church.

Match-Up also wanted to broaden its outreach to Spanish-speaking elders. In 2000, they established a satellite office at a nursing home, Sherrill House, in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, which has a large Spanish-speaking population.

A coordinator there organizes visits and medical escorts for older, Hispanic patients. The Sherrill House Board of Directors provides funding to help pay for the coordinator and provides free office space.

A Volunteer Brings Smiles to Isolated Elders

In April 2008, a volunteer named Rafaela Chavez-Beato took a visitor around the Sherrill House nursing home while checking in on several elderly people living there. All only spoke Spanish and either had no family or received few visits from their family. Some appeared to have dementia. During the visits, Chavez-Beato smiled and laughed, asked

how they were doing and gave them pats on the back or kisses on the cheek. She told everyone she would return soon.

The change in patients' demeanor was sometimes dramatic. Some were sleeping or staring out windows when Chavez-Beato arrived. Several people seemed to find new energy when they saw her. One woman who had the television on but appeared not to be watching it, excitedly showed Chavez-Beato several birthday cards she had received. She was eager to talk and asked Chavez-Beato to come back again.

Later that day, Seckel-Cerrotti received a call that Sherrill House, where Chavez-Beato was doing her visits, might not be able to provide funding anymore for the Match-Up project. Without funding for a volunteer coordinator and office space there, it was unclear whether Chavez-Beato's visits would continue. Seckel-Cerrotti looked discouraged and tired when relating the news.

But she said she would start looking for another nursing home to see if it would provide office space and funding. "That's what we do. We get down and we pick ourselves up again," she said.

As of November 2008 she still had no word whether Sherrill House would continue its funding of *Faith in Action*.