**Elder Affairs program helps those in need**

*This monthly series looks at the many programs that are financially supported by the Diocesan Services Appeal in the Diocese of Palm Beach. Donations to the DSA stay local, financing 47 Catholic initiatives within our five counties. The funding protects the most vulnerable among us, from the unborn child to the elderly, provides food for those who are hungry, sustains our Catholic schools, supports seminarians preparing for the priesthood and much more. This installment in the series explores the Elder Affairs program of Catholic Charities.*

WILLIAM CONE of the Florida Catholic staff

RIVIERA BEACH – A child in the womb is totally at the mercy of other people. At the same time, an elderly person with diminished mental capacity due to a dementia-related illness can be just as vulnerable to negative consequences. That’s where the Elder Affairs program of Catholic Charities can help.

For 44 years, the Elder Affairs program has been a Catholic option for courts in Palm Beach County to appoint a legal guardian for older people in need. Since the program began, it hasn’t had to reinvent itself, said Amy Hansen, Elder Affairs program administrator for Catholic Charities.

“That really speaks to the need for the vulnerable population that the program is serving,” she said. “We haven’t had to add any new services. It’s exactly the same.”

The program, based at the St. Francis Center in Riviera Beach, serves clients in their 60s through 90s, Hansen said. “At the point that the person is determined to be incapacitated, the court will appoint a guardian to manage various affairs for that individual. And that’s taking into account that there’s not already a power of attorney or a health care surrogate or someone else in the family maybe who could act as the guardian,” she said.

Hansen, who has been part of the program for more than 20 years, said she sees three scenarios play out to establish that a guardian is needed to oversee someone’s affairs.

“It might be an issue of financial exploitation, where there’s a need for a guardian to step in and protect the person’s assets and income or property,” she said.

“I see a lot of cases of neglect. It’s really self-neglect, more than neglect by a caregiver, where it’s beyond their means or their capability to care for themselves,” she said. Those cases are often prompted by the state Department of Children and Families discovering an older person living in deplorable conditions in their home.

Hansen said she has encountered very few physical abuse cases that could initiate a court’s desire to appoint a legal guardian.

“Once Catholic Charities is appointed as guardian, our case managers are able to go out and they do an assessment,” she said. “They secure services, so if somebody is living at home, but they don’t have the means to pay for care, or there are not enough benefits to keep them safe, case managers will make arrangements for maybe a nursing home or an assisted-living placement.

“We look at the financial picture. How’s the person going to pay for it? So, the agency and the program does not subsidize any services or care, but we utilize the individual’s income and assets and determine if they’re eligible for any type of benefits to help offset the cost of care,” Hansen added.

After that, the case managers follow up with the client and make sure the person is receiving all their medical care and their personal and social needs are being met, which includes their spiritual care. Catholic Charities serves clients of all faith traditions.

Frankie Chevere, CEO of Catholic Charities, emphasized that the agency’s mission – Helping people in need at all stages of life (from the moment of conception to their natural death) – is ingrained in the work of Elder Affairs.

“That part is very important at the end of people’s lives,” he said. “Many people are forgotten without means and attention and care. So, that’s what we do, but our program is more focused on legal and technical aspects, which is their guardianship.”

The personal contact between case managers and their clients was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Keeping tabs on their clients was difficult while in-person visits were prohibited. They mostly relied on telephone and video conferences arranged with nurses and health aides.

“That was a struggle because it’s very important to have eyes on the client and see them in their living situation that they’re being cared for,” Hansen said. “Now facilities are pretty much all back up and running,” with case managers taking precautions, such as interacting in a larger, ventilated room, wearing masks and sanitizing.

“It’s important for the clients to have that connection as well. A greater portion of our clients cannot communicate by telephone or wouldn’t know who’s calling them,” she said.

Hansen said she appreciates the interest in her program, which she sees as a lifeline for seniors who are overlooked at times.

“Our older folks are very vulnerable, and the program is just so important to step in and really instill and give back that dignity to the person, making sure that they’re cared for properly, they’re treated well when they’re not able to make those decisions for themselves,” she said.

*Thanks to the generosity of Diocesan Services Appeal donors, the compassionate Elder Affairs program is supported by the Diocese of Palm Beach. The faithful’s participation in the appeal is a vital part of the diocese’s ability to provide these services. For more information about Catholic Charities’ Elder Affairs program, visit* [*www.ccdpb.org*](http://www.ccdpb.org)*. For details on the DSA and how to donate, go to* [*www.DiocesePB/DSA*](http://www.DiocesePB/DSA)*.*