

Marsha Kreucher, director at the Community Action Agency, leads charge against poverty

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By **Tarryl Jackson | Jackson Citizen Patriot**

When it comes to helping Jackson County's residents pull themselves out of poverty, Marsha Kreucher usually is the one leading the charge.

Her organization, the Community Action Agency, serves more than 23,000 residents in Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties. It runs more than 70 programs, from adult education to foreclosure counseling to financial literacy.

Under Kreucher's leadership since the late 1980s, the nonprofit also has spearheaded projects such as the revitalization of Partnership Park, the Center for Family Health and the Community Foreclosure Coalition.

"She's always someone who has had an open mind and will listen and try something that hasn't been done before," said Neeta Delaney, a longtime activist and director of the foreclosure coalition.

As the community slowly comes out of the recession, her work is far from finished. Kreucher plans to keep her agency at the forefront of the anti-poverty movement.

"For low-income people to be prosperous, the community has to be prosperous," said Kreucher, 63.

'Tremendous leader'

Kreucher started working for the Community Action Agency in 1985 as the director of the Hillsdale County operation. In 1988, the Detroit native was selected as CEO of the three-county agency.

"I think it was my enthusiasm for this work that made the board decide I was worth a try," Kreucher said.

When she started, the agency had a budget of about \$4 million with 20 to 25 programs. Now, the annual budget averages \$18 million. Most of its funding comes from the federal government.

Early in her tenure, Kreucher turned her attention to Jackson County's high infant-mortality rate.

Thanks to a collaborative effort spearheaded by the Community Action Agency, the Center for Healthy Beginnings opened in 1991 to address the county's infant mortality rate of 11.7 deaths per 1,000 live births. At first, it provided prenatal care to expectant low-income mothers.

During the center's first four years, the rate dropped to 8.7 per 1,000 births, falling below the state average.

"It was a community-defined problem that we stepped into and decided to take a leadership role on," Kreucher said. "Everybody had so much pride in that (center). It was our baby."

Today, the community health center — now known as the Center for Family Health — provides primary health care and dental care to about 24,000 adults and children across the county. The center is building a new 54,000-square-foot health facility downtown that is scheduled to open this summer.

"It is so far beyond our original vision," Kreucher said. "It just warms my heart."

Molly Kaser, the Center for Family Health's executive director, said the center would not have come to fruition without Kreucher taking the reins.

"Early on, people recognized that she is a tremendous leader," Kaser said. "She's someone that wants to do the right things for the right reasons."

Kaser has known Kreucher for 20 years and was one of the first people hired at the community health center. "I've learned a great deal from her," Kaser said. "She's someone I've looked to for guidance and support."

Leading the way

Early childhood education also is a point of pride at the agency, Kreucher said.

In 1996, the agency became the first in Michigan to pilot Early Head Start, a program designed for children ages 3 and younger. The local program was one of 17 in the country to participate in a research project to assess the program's effectiveness.

Hiram Fitzgerald, associate provost for university outreach and engagement at Michigan State University, worked with Kreucher on the project.

"She has a clear perspective on where her agency is going," he said. "She's 100 percent interested in transforming Jackson."

The Community Action Agency also helped spearhead the revitalization of Partnership Park, a neighborhood of 700 residents bordered by Washington Avenue and Morrell, Blackstone and Francis streets and once concentrated with high crime and blight.

In the past 10 years, more than \$15 million has been invested into the neighborhood through federal, state and private sources.

As a result, 20 homes have been built, 44 housing units have been rehabilitated, and the neighborhood has gotten new streetlights and sidewalks.

The Rev. Jay Cummings, pastor of St. Johns United Church of Christ, 801 S. Mechanic St., has worked with Kreucher to help revitalize the neighborhood.

It started with the church's \$1 million addition, which went on to house a fellowship hall and gymnasium, two Head Start classes, an after-school homework club and an elder-care and respite center.

The neighborhood association and the agency also worked together to start the Barham Center as a resource center for day care, senior programs and other services.

Cummings said Kreucher is willing to be hands-on and is in tune with what is going on, but she also lets people lead themselves.

Challenges, goals

Also on the forefront for Kreucher and her agency is making hundreds of homes more energy-efficient and reducing energy costs for low-income families in the three-county area.

The Community Action Agency received \$11.7 million in federal stimulus funds to weatherize up to 1,700 homes by March 2012. As of mid-February, 1,151 homes has been weatherized.

"She's very innovative and creative," Georgia Fojtasek, president and CEO of Allegiance Health, said about Kreucher. "She's constantly looking for opportunities and solutions."

Some people plant seeds that grow into something bigger, but "people like Marsha grow gardens in a community," Fojtasek said. "That's what I really value about her."

Still, the agency might have some more challenges ahead.

President Barack Obama has proposed cutting funding in half for Community Action Agencies next year.

The agency receives about \$500,000 annually in Community Service Block Grant funding, which often is used as seed money to start projects such as Partnership Park and to help save the homes of people facing foreclosure.

Such a cut could mean staff layoffs, Kreucher said, but it's hard to predict what the final outcome will be at this point. She is not ready to panic yet, she said.

Her organization still has an ambitious agenda. Its five-year strategic plan calls for expanding programs such as Head Start, adult education and housing counseling. The agency also looks to continue its weatherization and revitalization efforts.

Kreucher, who has lived in Jackson for about seven years with her husband, John, said she has been motivated by so many people in the community who simply want to make a difference.

"It makes you more optimistic about people," she said. "I feel like I'm on the right side of the world."

Profile

- Age: 63
- Education: Bachelor's degree in English and sociology from Wayne State University
- Career: CEO of Community Action Agency since 1988; the agency's Hillsdale County director from 1985 to 1988
- Family: Married to John for 25 years