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Thursday, Sep 6, 2007

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Posted on Sun, Aug. 26, 2007

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Aiding the county's women, girls

The Chester County Fund for Women and Girls has been offering aid to many groups for a decade.

By Helen I. Hwang
For The Inquirer

Lisette Gonzalez, 9, sat in the dentist's chair at Community Volunteers in Medicine in West Chester for her first dental checkup in America. She said she felt excited but a little nervous.

She had moved to West Grove from Mexico only a year before and speaks hardly any English. Wearing a denim dress and spunky brown cowboy boots, she had come with her mother, Elia Díaz Jardines, and her brother, who was in the adjoining free medical clinic.

With no health insurance, Gonzalez is lucky Community Volunteers exists in Chester County. The nonprofit health center doesn't receive federal monies, so it relies on funding such as a \$5,000 grant from the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls.



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The West Chester endowment group is a grant-making and education organization that distributes money to nonprofit organizations that work directly with clients. Since the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls started in 1997, it has distributed money to more than 40 nonprofit groups in the area.

Funding for the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls comes through donations from individuals, foundations and businesses. No money comes from government sources.

In 2007, the fund gave out grants worth \$160,000 to organizations working on issues including domestic violence and mental health.

Heidi McPherson, executive director of the organization, will be the first to say that the county is wealthy but that doesn't mean there are not major issues affecting women and children.

For example, she said, a problem such as domestic violence crosses all income levels and usually victimizes women.

The Pennsylvania Home of the Sparrow, a transitional housing shelter for domestic-violence victims, was one of the first recipients of a grant from the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls.

"They've been phenomenal," said Pat McLennan, executive director of the shelter, whose support from the fund has grown from \$2,500 to more than \$18,000 this year.

McLennan said it takes \$500 a month to house a woman and two children, along with providing counseling and case services.

Another recipient of the fund's donations is the Maternal and Child Health Consortium of Chester County, which received \$14,000 earlier this year to support its Maternal Depression Project. Executive director Pam Bryer said the grant "allows us to reach out to pregnant and postpartum women to reduce chances of prenatal and postpartum depression."

Three years ago, the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls started the Girls Advisory Board. One of only 10 girls' philanthropic programs in the country, the group awards grants to nonprofit organizations. The girls meet, design the grants themselves, and decide how to disburse the money. Last year, 20 Chester County girls ages 12 to 17 participated.

Kati Henry, 18, was in the first program. She plans to attend the University of Maryland to major in political science and public administration, having been inspired by her experience at the women's organization. She said she wanted to go into politics because "you have the power to make policies that can help people so much more."

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Clare Horan, 17, another program participant, is going to be a senior at Westtown School. The experience was "really empowering," she said. "How often does a teenager get \$20,000 to make a difference?"

McPherson, who makes about \$90,000 a year at the organization, lives in East Goshen with her husband, Richard, and two children, Ellie, 16, and Daniel, 15.

After growing up in Malvern, she went to Smith College in Massachusetts and then lived in Colorado and California for almost 16 years. She said she wanted her children to have a "sense of family," so they returned to the East Coast.

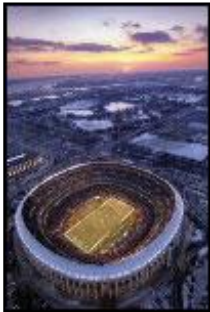
Right now, the Chester County Fund for Women and Girls is in the middle of its endowment campaign to raise \$3 million and bring its total endowment to \$5 million. Last year, local nonprofit groups requested \$300,000, and the fund could give out only \$160,000.

By increasing the endowment and growing the Girls Advisory Board program, McPherson said she wanted to "launch the next generation" of philanthropists.

For Information

The Chester County Fund for Women and Girls is at 1450 E. Boot Rd., Suite 400D, Goshen Executive Center, West Chester. To learn more, call 484-356-0940 or visit [www.ccwomenandgirls.org](#).

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