

## **RESPOND works to make finding help easier**

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It's not that there's no help in Lake County, it's just that it can take so long to get it.

A recent resource guide, published by United Way of Lake County, listed contact information for hundreds of agencies and institutions offering assistance for everything from mortgage problems to smoking cessation to free tax preparation. But getting help is usually not as simple as picking up the phone. Getting help often requires paperwork, case management and explaining a need over and over and over.

The red-tape boondoggle is not only frustrating to those in need, but to those who try to help them, and it's why two existing Lake County organizations have become one.

PEC, or Partners for Effective Collaborations, and RESPOND, Respecting Every Single Person through Outreach, Networking and Diversity, is now RESPOND Lake County, a networking group for social service professionals. Two chapters meet bimonthly for the express purpose of getting to know each other, to swap cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and to learn what their respective agencies provide and to whom, all with the goal of streamlining access.

"We're trying to minimize the frustration," said RESPOND member Maggie Morales, community development manager for Zion Township. "Our members are working to eliminate the overhead so that when they're calling an organization, they're actually calling a person, as opposed to having to go through those horrible automated voice mails."

### Working together

RESPOND Lake County members are learning how to use a new data management tool called HMIS ServicePoint. HMIS stands for Homeless Management Information System. The database can be accessed through a secure Web site and allows social service agencies to share information on clients.

"If a client comes in and needs four different services in four different areas, ServicePoint prevents them from having to do four different intakes," said Maggie Morales of Zion Township,

One common case management headache is the inability to quickly help a new client in dire need, perhaps homeless, who may show up near the end of the workday or on a Friday afternoon.

"They need a lot of different types of assistance and you have to reach someone who specializes in those areas," Morales said. "You need a name. You need a number."

Joining PEC and RESPOND into a single coalition made sense because both groups claimed many of the same members, including county-wide agencies like Catholic Charities, One Hope United, and the Salvation Army, and both had the goal of helping frontline workers improve in their jobs. PEC served residents of Zion, Beach Park and Winthrop Harbor. RESPOND served Waukegan and North Chicago.

"We just got married, literally," said Zion Township Supervisor Cheri Ditzig, who played matchmaker.

Ditzig founded PEC out of frustration over trying to work with the mammoth state Department of Human Services, which oversees things like cash assistance, medical cards and food stamps.

“We couldn’t get through,” Ditzig said. “Our clients couldn’t get through. Now we call a specific person.”

Carmen Patlan, director of human concerns for Most Blessed Trinity Parish in Waukegan, is cofounder of the original RESPOND.

### Jumping through hoops

“If I call a person who knows me, they’re going to respond much quicker,” Patlan said. “If I’m doing a referral, for instance, I can tell Rebecca at the Salvation Army, that I’ve already done intake, that the person legitimately needs help. We don’t have to keep sending the client out to repeat their story over and over. Rebecca knows who I am. It beats going through phone books and jumping through hoops.”

During a recent lunchtime meeting in Zion, RESPOND Lake County members shared a meal, joined-in a book discussion, and brainstormed on ways they might collaborate.

Susan Clark, head of adult services for the Zion-Benton Public Library, said her staff frequently takes calls from people who need direction on how to find things including telephones for the hearing impaired, local food pantries and defensive driving classes.

“We look up information and give out numbers,” Clark said. “But the better we get to know other service providers, the better we can steer. A lot of people need help badly and they need it fast.”

When agencies work together, funding is maximized and more people receive help, Ditzig said.

“People may feel helpless,” she said. “But we can give them hope.”



After hanging information and services on the wall, social workers use string to connect them up. | Rob Dicker~Sun-Times Media

Benton Township Supervisor Jan Suthard places a tag with her organization's top three services on the wall. | Rob Dicker~Sun-Times Media



## Photo Gallery



Carol Romanowski of Zion-Benton Public Library participates in a team building game at a meeting of RESPOND, a coalition of social workers at the Shiloh Center. | Rob Dicker~Sun-Times Media



Gene Salvadale of the Charmm'd Foundation discusses "Switch," a book by Chip and Dan Heath.