

The Village for Families and Children: Then and Now

By Joanne Orlando

The Village for Families and Children is Greater Hartford's oldest not for profit organization devoted to the well-being of children and their families. In 1809 a group of women established The Female Beneficent Society (FBS) beginning its commitment to helping children. This organization "adopted" orphan children – those who lost parents to illness or accident but also children who were removed from their homes due to inadequate or harmful parenting. In 1833 the Hartford Orphan Asylum (HAO) was formed – one of the other 19th century predecessors of The Village.

In 1865, the Female Beneficent Society and HOA merged. Several other programs and institutions would join what would become the Village – The Children's Aid Society was founded in 1892 by Virginia Thrall Smith – creating Hartford's first free kindergarten and focusing on practical aid to children. The Children's Aid Society also led to the establishment of the Newington Children's Hospital – now Connecticut Children's Medical Center. Services to children continued to grow as they were supported during the crisis of World War II . The FBS, HOS, CCAS and the Hartley Child Guidance Clinic merged to become Children's Services of Connecticut in 1950 – the direct antecedent of The Village.

In 1925, Rev. Francis Goodwin made a gift of 16 acres of land in what was then a rural area on 1680 Albany Avenue. Beginning in 1925, a number of brick cottages were built on the site – becoming Children's Village. It is now immediately next to the Unitarian Society of Hartford, and we share an enormous lawn.

In the years after World War II the Village expanded services and developed new sites to provide care. The Village began to provide additional services in partnership with the State Department of Children and Family Services – merging with the Family Services Society of Hartford in 1993. In that year, the Village changed its official name to The Village for Families and Children. In 2002, the Village opened the Center for Community life in the old Trolley Barn on Wethersfield Avenue – bringing services to the South End of Hartford. In 2009, the Village opened the Travelers Early Childhood Learning Center on Spring Street.

Today, the Village continues to help children, families and adults "find the hope they need to believe that their lives are meaningful. The Village sponsors a number of innovative programs and develops real connections with clients. In the 200 years since Female Beneficent Society was formed the recognition of the need for social services has grown. At The Village, children with psychiatric problems are helped by counseling, comprehensive care as needed. Those who have to be removed from their families are able to live short term in Safe House where they get support and safety. Those

struggling in school attended the Extended Day Treatment Program in designated schools. In recent years, the Village has expanded its mission and now provides mental health services to adults.

During the pandemic there was virtual counseling available for adults. There were tutorials about working at home with children going to school from home. You Tube yoga and relaxation sessions, and lessons for children were provided. While The Village provides services regularly, they also respond to crises.

The Unitarian Society of Hartford has had a special relationship with The Village since 2013. Pre-Pandemic, children from The Village attended our annual picnic and Festival of Seasons. Hopefully these events will return. Every summer we have raised money for The Villager Uniform fundraiser and continue to do so now.

The Village, like many organizations, is having a tough time financially. There was a Good Neighbor Offering earlier for The Village. Thank you for giving. The Uniform fundraiser will be announced later this spring. Let's continue to be good neighbors.

The Village has evolved providing care at new sites and expanding services, yet no matter where its location or name the mission has never changed : ***TO BUILD A COMMUNITY OF STRONG, HEALTHY FAMILIES WHO PROTECT AND NURTURE CHILDREN.***
