

Meet the people behind some of our area's most notable nonprofit institutions and those they help.

A BABY CENTER

SOME PARENTS COME INTO A BABY CENTER RETICENT. This is a place, after all, for a helping hand—free diapers, blankets, and sometimes even a crib if a good soul has recently dropped one off. Others come in cheerfully—happy for the support, which they hope they'll only need temporarily.

Entering A Baby Center, located in the Lorusso Room at the Federated Church in Hyannis, may not be easy, but for many families on Cape Cod, the need to do so is great. And once inside, so is the love.

Gently used clothes and supplies stack the shelves and bins lined against the walls, which were recently painted a soothing yellow by 50 local Rotarians. Knitted blankets the colors of Easter eggs are neatly folded in a pile. A rack of doll-size sweaters and fleece tops hang for perusal. Impossibly small

workboots, sneakers, and other shoes await a little one's first steps. This day, two babies in carriers sit on the floor drowsily eyeing each other while their mothers "shop" with the help of volunteers directing them to sizes. There are bottles, cans of formula, a crib, and, of course, disposable diapers, the center's hottest item. Families snap up 15,000 diapers a month.

A Baby Center was founded seven years ago by members of the Cape Cod Council of Churches. They saw a need for young families who, despite having jobs, were struggling to make ends meet.

"They expected to serve maybe 100 babies a year," Mary Pat Piersons, center director, says of the organization's founders. "They served 100 the first month."

Families with children up to three years old who meet the financial guidelines of the federal Women, Infants, and Children program, and who live on the Cape and Islands,

may receive services. While most Baby Center clients are single mothers, Piersons sees many grandparents, single fathers, foster parents, and working families in the seasonal labor force who aren't making it on their own.

"Cape Cod is a seasonal area, and seasonal workers are living a hard life," observes Piersons, a former nursery school teacher and center volunteer.

A Baby Center also acts as a referral service, directing people to other programs that are available, such as fuel assistance, food pantries, and shelters.

Piersons, program assistant Tish Friend, and 40 volunteers run the center, which serves an average of 140 families a week and has lent a hand to more than 5,000 people since opening its doors. The center comes under the nonprofit status of the Council of Churches, and an advisory committee made up of child and family advocates, a pediatrician, social worker, a client, and other members help guide the center's important work.

Fundraisers, grants, and donations from individuals and businesses help piece together the annual \$124,000 budget. Local garden clubs and other organizations hold "showers" for A Baby Center and quilters and knitters make lovely blankets. In fact, according to Piersons, one knitter recognized her blanket on a baby while she was grocery shopping and overheard the baby's mother tell an acquaintance who complimented it: "Yes, isn't it beautiful? It's the only new thing my baby's had."

A Baby Center:
508-771-8157;
www.ababycenter.org

Executive Director Mary Pat Piersons, fourth from right, standing, and program assistant Tish Friend, far left, with volunteers.

