

Hospital Fund Becomes a Lifesaver for Needy Workers

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Yet another payroll deduction?

Dozens of employees at Santa Teresita Hospital do it voluntarily in an unusual program to help their fellow workers.

Recognizing how tough times are for some co-workers, about 55 hospital employees have from \$1 to \$20 deducted from their biweekly paychecks in what started less than a year ago as an informal pool to aid two nurses but since has grown into a service that has helped people pay utility bills, avoid homelessness and visit ailing relatives.

"If we keep our ears open, we hear of circumstances where people are really in trouble," said Lisa Eddy, coordinator of quality improvement for the 253-bed hospital. "There are people working full-time here who literally don't have enough money to put food on the table."

It was Eddy who approached hospital administrators last March after employees collected money to help a nurse whose house had burned down, leaving her nearly destitute, and a second who had mounting expenses from cancer treatment.

Eddy suggested opening a fund for employees like these. The hospital's chief executive officer, Michael Costello, promised in turn that the hospital would match any funds donated during the first three months-and appointed Eddy director.

Those first three months brought in \$3,000, plus the hospital match. Altogether, the fund has raised \$10,700. Nearly \$5,000 has been given to 10 applicants.

Any of Santa Teresita's 450 employees can donate money to the Personnel Assistance League through payroll deductions. In addition to the regular contributors, others offer occasional donations.

"The fund is designed for emergency relief," Eddy said. "For food, shelter, clothing and other needs that might pose an extreme physical or emotional hardship."

Applications for money are available in a main hallway of the hospital and can be dropped into a locked box. The box is checked daily, and disbursements are often made the same day.

A five-member panel evaluates requests and gives out money. All applicants remain anonymous except to the committee treasurer, who checks the box, and panel leader.

The league also directs needy employees to social service agencies, delivers groceries to the temporarily homebound, assists with home repairs and helps arrange child care.

Applicants must have been employed by the hospital for six months and have a need that the panel considers an emergency.

"We've only turned down two requests," Eddy said. "Those were legitimate needs, but they weren't emergencies."

But Pat Medrano had a real emergency on her hands two months ago.

A single parent who works in the hospital business office to support her mother and 9-year-old daughter, Medrano was struggling to make ends meet. The electric utility that serves her home was threatening to disconnect service shortly before Christmas because of missed payments.

Medrano, who learned of the program through a flyer she picked up at the hospital, requested \$200. Instead, the fund approved \$350-enough for Medrano to pay her delinquent utility bills, and buy food and a few Christmas presents.

"I was thrilled," she said. "I thought, 'Oh, good, we don't have to starve.' "

The program no longer helps out with threatened foreclosures because panel members saw that requests would quickly outstrip resources, but last September, the league helped a woman who had missed several mortgage payments after separating from her husband. The \$1,500 she received enabled her to keep the house.

"I would have been left with nothing," said the employee, who declined to give her name. "I don't know what I would have done."

The league also has helped:

* A nursing assistant whose financial plight forced her and her daughter to live in a neighbor's garage. The two were using the restroom facilities at a nearby service station until the league helped place them in an apartment.

* A member of the housekeeping staff whose family was living in a low-rent hotel and was facing the prospect of moving into a shelter. The assistance enabled them to move into an apartment.

* An admitting clerk who lacked the money for a plane ticket to visit her severely ill father in Texas.

"When they gave me the money, I asked about paying it back," said the clerk, Kathleen James. "I almost died when they said they were giving it to me."

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