

New Township leader wants to raise awareness

Paddie Brennen sits down for a Q & A with *The Current*

ALAN P. HENRY, Staff Writer

Paddie Brennen was elected supervisor of New Trier Township in April 2013 after four years of service as a Township trustee. Prior to her service as a trustee, she was a member of the Township Advisory Committee on Mental Health for eight years.

The Winnetka native is a retired information technology professional. She is a past president and current member of the St. Leonard's Ministries Board, where she also tutors high school students. In addition, she is a member of the House of Good Shepherd Board and is a teacher and volunteer coordinator for the LEED Council.

Brennen recently sat with *The Winnetka Current* to discuss township government's role in the life of the community. The following is an edited version of that conversation.

Alan Henry: Township government likes to call itself "the government closest to the people." Is that an accurate characterization?

Paddie Brennen: Yes. It means we have an obligation to be available, collaborative, open to suggestions and attempting to find where it is we can be the most effective. On the North Shore, understand that all of general assistance and emergency assistance is handled through the Township. That is what puts us in the position of being important to each one of these towns. It isn't as though everybody here lives in a mansion. There is everything in this township, from soup to nuts, trust me.

AH: How has the recent recession and anemic recovery affected your mission?

PB: It hasn't so much changed our mission, as it has made us acutely aware that there isn't any segment of the population that is free from being involved in what is happening in this economy. Often it's people who were doing fine, particularly those in their 50s and up who lost their jobs and can't find another one. They had savings. They planned well and now they are going, 'What am I going to do?' We can step in and be helpful. We used to have five to eight families a year that required long-term or emergency assistance. Starting around 2007, it rose to around 40, and now it has leveled off, but it is not going down.

AH: Talk about the food pantry, which served 1,032 households in fiscal 2013.

PB: Most people are not coming in for really basic things. They are coming in for things they can add to what it is they have to make the meals that they have appealing to the people who are eating them. They want to serve a muffin for breakfast instead of a piece of stale toast, so they will pick up a box of muffin mix or fresh bread.

AH: As supervisor, what do you hope to accomplish?

PB: My personal goal is to make sure people are aware we are here, that we have services, that we are available to them, and they need to know they can call anytime or stop by.

AH: That's true on the agency side as well?

PB: I go to meetings of various agencies that know about us, but no supervisor



Paddie Brennen in the New Trier Township Food Pantry, one of the many services the new supervisor hopes to promote. PHOTO SUBMITTED

has ever shown up. I just sort of spread the word that we are here, and that we will be delighted to help you in any way we can. It has to meet our guidelines and our rules, but don't just say to yourself, 'Well don't bother with New Trier Township.'

AH: Are you looking for volunteer help?

PB: We are looking for volunteers at all times. You can volunteer by bringing food to the food pantry, particularly in the summer, when kids are home from school so more people need food at home. We also need people to work on our constituent committees, which monitor the way we give away money, which is taxdollars.

We need citizens to come in to help do the vetting of all these programs and to make sure we are doing the right things. If anybody is interested in helping us, they can come in. We will find a job they can do.

AH: From fiscal years 2010-2013, the Township's budget for office staff and expenses and compensation for officials actually went down \$2,775, to \$786,725. How did that happen?

PB: We have had everyone take on extra responsibilities rather than hiring an extra person. We are very careful. We don't take stationary and say, 'Gee, that guy's name should be on there' and just run it and run it. Where we

can, we save money.

AH: The township's programs and services budget, by contrast, increased during the same time from \$1.34 million to \$1.78 million. Why is that?

PB: We had a fair amount of money in reserve because we never wanted to be in a position of not being able to do things we think are important. We decided that

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perhaps we were being too conservative, so we made more money available. Our reserve is now not quite a year's funding.

AH: The Township supports dozens of programs, including youth programs, senior citizen supports, aid to persons with disabilities, food, shelter and emergency relief for people in need. It also helps with tax assessment, building permit, property sales and other regulatory issues. Talk

about the fastest growing component: the Community Support Grant program, which last year spent \$160,000.

PB: We used to have a set number, say 50. Part of my thing is that, why should 50 people get it and two people not get it. Putting it on a lottery basis does not seem to make sense to me. That is a change from the way things have been done in the past. This year we funded 102 grants. They have to make a case and go through all the paperwork and do what has to be done.