

## Visiting Nurses Association of Southwestern Indiana, Incorporated

Founded: 1888

Location: City Hospital, corner of Second and Division Streets, Evansville (1888–91); Lower Third Street (1891– ); 509 Upper Fourth Street (1908); 9 Jefferson Avenue (1912, 1916); Room 315 Mercantile-Commercial Bank Building (1923–27); 420 South First Street (later designated 120 Southeast First Street) (1927–80); 600 Southeast Sixth Street (ca.1981–95); 610 East Walnut (1995– )

Eleanor Igleheart organized a King's Daughters Circle with the express purpose of providing "cheer" to the patients of City Hospital in Evansville by giving them flowers and food. At the request of Doctors Owen and Walker, who deplored the lack of trained nurses, the twenty-four-member group of women established a training school for nurses in 1890 and, three years after that, opened a nurses' home on Lower Third Street. The first class of nurses graduated in 1891. After the closing of the hospital, Owen and Walker established their own training school and the Circle began to concentrate its energy on supporting visiting nurses. A Charity Club was created by the Circle to carry on the group's original purpose.

At the turn of the twentieth century the King's Daughters Circle began paying the salary of a part-time nurse from Deaconess Hospital who would visit the homes of the sick poor. The Charity Club began to supply milk, clothing, and food to those in poverty, concentrating especially on mothers. In 1902 the Circle took on the responsibility of paying for the salary of a full-time visiting nurse, Lydia Metz, at the rate of \$720 a year. Funding was provided through a number of sources including subscriptions from Sunday school classes, women's church groups, and memorials. Metz made around 2,000 visits that year, continuing to work for the group until her death in 1915. The organization

changed its name to the King's Daughters District Nursing Service sometime before 1907 and to the Visiting Nurse Circle around 1912.

In 1915 Elizabeth Kurzdorfer succeeded Lydia Metz as the visiting nurse for the Circle. Eight years later the organization changed its name to the Visiting Nurse Association, to better reflect its mission. The agency accepted a contract to carry out tests for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, enabling it to hire two new nurses, Sophia Gumbel and Anna Thompson, for charity work. The Visiting Nurses were quite visible in the community and could be easily recognized by the dark blue uniforms they wore, which were not complete without the black beaver sailor hats and medical bags that were also part of the organization's traditional accoutrements. Sarah Wartmann served as the executive secretary of the group in the 1910s.

During the 1920s the craze of consolidation swept through most philanthropic umbrella federations including the Evansville Community Welfare Association, an organization similar to the United Way. A survey supported by the National Organization for Public Health Nursing and underwritten by the Evansville Welfare Association supported consolidating all health agencies into one group to avoid conflict between agencies and wasteful costs due to duplication of effort. The next year the Visiting Nurse Association formed a tentative partnership with the Babies Milk Fund Association, agreeing to share an executive secretary, to form a joint executive committee, and to occupy the same office space. Direct management and financing continued to be separate until 1926 when the move was made permanent and the groups merged with the Tuberculosis Nursing Service to form the Evansville Public Health Nursing Association, Incorporated.

The Babies Milk Fund Association had begun as the Charity Club, later switching names to Girls' Aid, and had originally been an auxiliary group to the King's Daughters Circle. It was reorganized as an independent entity in 1913 to provide food and educational information to mothers. By 1924 the association ran three clinics and had also hired a nurse to make visits to the sick poor. As the association's nurse, Mary Trimble made more than 4,000 visits her first year on the job and gave out approximately 15,000 quarts of milk; statistics only increased from there. The agency raised money for its activities through subscriptions and an annual charity ball. Four new staff members were added after 1915. Many patients received care for free, but if people had the means to pay for the service they were expected to do so.

With the merger the actions of all three organizations were consolidated and made more efficient. Emily Orr Clifford, one of the founders of the King's Daughters Circle, became the new agency's first president. Louise Dunkerson Orr, who joined the Girls' Aid organization in 1901, was selected as the second president. Hulda A. Bieri Cron of Cleveland, Ohio, became the agency's executive secretary in 1924. The first constitution provided for three separate departments that corresponded to the work of the three former agencies.

Early in the history of the united agency it began to take on even more responsibilities. In April 1926 it accepted the publicly funded health testing work, formerly done by the Red Cross, in the public schools. Later in the year a dentist was added to one of the organization's clinics. An auxiliary, with a beginning membership of forty-seven women, was formed in 1926 to aid the paid staff with clinical and clerical work. The auxiliary became an independent group later in the year. When the

Community Chest failed to raise enough money to support the association, the group reluctantly pulled out of the community-wide funding organization. Board members helped cover the costs of the agency for three months, the township trustees paid for the organization's tuberculosis work, and the auxiliary paid for the milk bill until an independent 1927 campaign provided two years of funding.

In 1927 the agency gained the cooperation of area doctors by enlisting several prominent physicians to sit on an advisory board that helped create the association's medical policies and procedures. The doctors provided the group with a schedule that helped the nurses and staff discern who should be able to pay, at least partially, for medical services. In addition the advisory board set up special days in area hospitals where the poor could come for free surgery. The association expanded its services in 1927 to include health checkups in the city's parochial schools and received a building downtown—thanks to E. Mead Johnson, Sr.—that helped to centralize all of the agency's functions

Throughout the early 1930s the Public Health Nursing Association remained independent of the Community Chest, but by 1934 independent fund-raising could not meet the needs of the agency, and a relationship with the Community Chest was reestablished. In 1953, after twenty-eight years of service to the Evansville agency, Hulda Cron retired as executive director. Throughout her tenure the scope of activities remained basically limited to educational instruction at the clinics and providing home nursing care for the poor and elderly.

Beginning in the early 1960s and continuing for almost a decade, a struggle developed between the city and county governments and the Nursing Association. In

1964 Mayor Frank McDonald asked the organization to move to the City-County Building that was to be completed in 1968. When the association's board of directors decided not to move, the mayor withheld city funds from the group. The board quickly changed its vote, and municipal funding was restored. In 1969, when the City-County Building was completed, the Nursing Association's board of directors decided to remain at the First Street location and once more city funds were withheld. In 1971 the agency faced a \$30,000 deficit and was forced to withdraw money from investments to cover the shortage, but the organization never moved into the City-County Building. City and county funding was later restored.

In the 1970s the organization expanded its services and somewhat altered its focus. In 1972 it was reorganized into the Visiting Nurse Association of Southwestern Indiana, Incorporated. (VNA) and began to provide home health care to those in Warrick County. In the years following, residents of Gibson, Perry, and Posey Counties began receiving care from the Evansville organization, and satellite offices were opened in neighboring communities. The offices on First Street in Evansville were remodeled, and Ida B. Ayer came on board as the new executive director in 1974. Three years later the agency began offering its first nonmedical services through a contract with the state to provide Title XX homemaking services to residents of southwestern Indiana, becoming the third largest agency to provide such services by the end of the decade. In 1978 the association started providing physical and occupational therapy, speech pathology, and medical social services to patients at Deaconess Hospital. All of these new services meant that more people began using the VNA as their primary care organization. Between 1977 and 1979 the number of people served by the VNA increased by 44

percent, while the budget of the VNA quadrupled between 1975 and the end of the decade to \$1 million.

By 1980 the VNA became the single largest provider of home health care services in the Hoosier State, making more than 71,000 home visits that year. In 1980 the board of directors developed a strategic plan. After the plan was presented, the board took action, selling the main office and building a new facility on the corner of Sixth and Mulberry Streets, which was completed in 1982. They also established a separate, not-for-profit corporation, HealthSkills Incorporated, from various strands of the Visiting Nurse Association to offer services to the private sector and stretched the association's traditional services into Spencer County. By the mid-1980s several programs, including the homemaking project, were transferred to HealthSkills and services began to be offered to patients in Kentucky and Illinois. In fiscal year 1984 the VNA made more than 100,000 visits and employed 150 nurses, assistants, and staff. In the same year, Narcissa L. "Cissy" Niemeier, a graduate of the University of Evansville and an association employee since 1971, took over the post of executive director from Patricia Galbraith.

In 1986 the VNA received accreditation from the National League of Nursing in recognition of the association's excellent home health care work. With the passage of time the association added more services. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation classes, medical counseling, and hospital after-care programs increased the VNA's visibility in the community. Funding was partially made possible by the United Way and various governments, as well as from private insurance companies. New staff added to the

agency included a pediatric care nurse, a speech-language pathologist, and more clerical workers.

New challenges arose for the VNA in the 1990s. In the first year of the decade business volume increased by 25 percent, while a nationwide nursing shortage made meeting the additional requests for service difficult. Between 1990 and 1991 overall services by the agency increased another 30 percent, raised in part because of the VNA's development of a hospice program for the terminally ill. Two years later the agency added infusion and home chemotherapy services. By the end of 1995 the organization aided patients in sixteen counties in Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky and employed 680 people. The rapid hiring of people over the course of the 1980s and 1990s meant that space at the Sixth and Mulberry Streets location was no longer adequate. Anticipating future needs, as well as present ones, the agency constructed a two-story building at a new site set on five acres on Walnut Street in downtown Evansville. The new property permitted for expansion in the future. In 1999 the mission of the VNA continued to be what Cissy Kraft, the executive director of the agency since 1982, described in 1995: to allow the sick, elderly, and poor "to live as independently as possible."