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The Community Center of Northern Westchester recently voted to approve governance changes to the organization and elected a new board of directors. Members of the new board are (back row, left to right) Chris Perkins, Manuel Mendez, Lisa Raue, Deborah Cerar, J. Michel Drude, Barbara Murphy and Fran Dowling; (front row, left to right) Alicia Sandberg, Shirley Buontempo, MaryEllen McLaughlin, Joni Martino, Lauren Cohen, Sheryl Bernhard and Laura Kaplan.

Community Center adopts board structure

By JOHN ROCHE

A newly elected board of directors represents not only a change in governance at the Community Center of Northern Westchester but also an effort to better serve the thousands of areas residents and hundreds of local families who count on the Katonah center in myriad ways.

The 14 new directors took office after a vote to change the center's bylaws on March 22, followed by elections for the board itself. The new governing body more closely resembles a typical board structure for a nonprofit organization. Previously, each of the center's 28 sponsoring organizations appointed a member to the board, with no set terms. According to members of the center's leadership team and representatives from the center's sponsoring organizations, the size of the board and other factors hindered the effectiveness of the previously constituted board.

The new board is expected to select officers in the near future.

"We felt that the board as it was set up became a bit too large to be manageable, and wanted to both reduce it in size and sharpen its focus," said Sheryl Bernhard, who served as the previous board's co-president before the bylaws change, and is now a member of the new board of directors. "This is an exciting time for us, and I think the new board will provide excellent guidance and leadership for the center."

Since it was founded in 1992, the Community Center of Northern Westchester has consistently grown in both numbers of clients served and services provided. From its location at 84 Bedford Road, the center helps local residents in need by providing food, clothing and access to other resources, including health care, educational assistance, job training and social services.

But over the course of the past 19 years, the number of sponsoring organizations also grew, from 10 to 28, Ms. Bernhard said. In surveys

conducted last year, 63 percent of the sponsoring organizations' representatives rated the center's board as "not effective" or only "partly effective."

In addition to its large size, the board also faced other obstacles, including the fact that directors were often selected by sponsoring organizations without particular regard to the center's leadership needs.

In looking at how the 28-member panel operated, the board last year determined that "the wide range of engagement by sponsoring organization representatives has resulted in a diffuse governing body, with varying degrees of understanding of, and capacity to fulfill, the requirements, duties and responsibilities normally assumed by directors of nonprofit organizations."

In February 2010 the center hired the Goodworks Advisory Group, a consultant to nonprofits, to analyze its governance structure. The consultant was hired through a \$2,500 matching grant provided by the Westchester Community Foundation aimed at strengthening the boards of area nonprofits.

Following extensive surveys, questionnaires and interviews with the center's leadership, volunteers, donors and constituents, the revamped board and necessary changes to the bylaws were proposed, discussed and refined.

"This new structure will enable us to get a lot more work done, to be more policy oriented, target the specific skill sets the center might need from one or more board members and really focus on what we as a board can do to build on the success of the center in its mission and service," said Ms. Bernhard, who is one

of 10 directors who served on the previous board that are now serving on the newly constituted board.

According to the changes to the bylaws, the new board of directors, not to exceed 16 members, will meet monthly to support and foster the center's mission and values, direct and oversee the center's policies, finances and operations and help position the center to meet the growing and changing needs of its clients and community.

Each year, the board's nominating committee will seek candidates for staggered three-year terms who bring specific skills and expertise necessary to foster effective leadership on the board, such as a legal background, financial expertise, marketing skills or social services experience.

"One of the most exciting aspects of the new board structure is this will enable us to bring people onto the board who might not necessarily be a member of one of our sponsoring organizations," Ms. Bernhard said. "That should result in being able to tap into an even larger pool of people who can bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the board."

The center's leaders believe that the additional skills and expertise the new board will bring to the table will enable directors to provide oversight and strategic planning for the day-to-day operations of the Community Center of Northern Westchester.

"I think this is a wonderful change for our center, and a really positive step for the way our board operates," said the center's executive director, Sherry Wolf. "This brings new talent, ideas and experience to the board, and I think will infuse new

energy into all areas of the center's operations. Our mission and day-to-day operations won't change, except to improve and evolve to best meet the needs of the community."

Ms. Wolf, who served as the board president for more than eight years before becoming the executive director three and half years ago, welcomed the new board and also credited the previous board for the wonderful job it did. "Not matter how large our board grew — and I think everyone agrees that it grew to an unmanageable size — members were also mindful of the center's mission, and worked hard to make sure that everything we did reflected that mission," Ms. Wolf said. "I am confident that the new board will also keep our operations in line with our mission."

The 28 sponsoring organizations will still play a key role in assisting the center to carry out its mission of "neighbors helping neighbors." Now called community partners, those organizations, considered "the backbone" of the center, will continue communicating the needs of the center to members of their own organization, encouraging volunteers and donations, and promoting drives for specific needs of the center as well as fund-raising.

The center's community partners will meet three to four times a year and will vote annually to elect or remove board directors, and, as needed, to amend its bylaws.

"The number of community partners can continue to grow, and those organizations will continue to play an essential part in the center, as they have from day one," Ms. Bernhard explained. "And the center's mission and values will remain the same, both now and as we continue to grow even further in the years to come."

The center is always looking for more volunteers, donations or other support for its programs and services. More information can be found at www.communitycenternw.org.

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