

Womanews

'Milk ladies' deliver nourishing benefit to needy infants

Dorothy Clarke bristled while she watched a television program several years ago about infant malnutrition in Chicago and the trauma suffered by infants being fed diluted baby formula.

Impoverished mothers, she learned, feed their babies diluted formula, or water mixed with gelatin because they can't afford formula. The babies, deprived of proper nutrition, suffer convulsions and retarded development.

"I never had a problem feeding my babies," says Clarke, a physical therapist who raised her five sons in the comfort of Lincolnwood. "Twenty minutes from our home, children were starving. Simplicity itself said, 'Let's pick up a bottle, go there and feed them ourselves.'" That is essentially what she did.

She called several high school classmates, most of them mothers, to share her brainchild—an organization to raise money to buy infant formula for distribution at shelters and food pantries throughout the city. The group responded with alacrity, and within a week, INFANT, Inc., was born.

Now twice monthly, the group fills a member's van with about



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

Dorothy Clarke (middle) and Joan Vering (left), of INFANT, Inc., deliver formula to Lisa Sima at a food pantry operated by Visitation Roman Catholic Church.

100 cases of formula and layettes that include donated blankets and clothing, and heads for the two dozen shelters INFANT serves.

Though INFANT members believe breastfeeding is the best way to nourish infants, it isn't always advisable if the mother is too young or malnourished herself. It also may be impossible if mothers are separated from babies that require special care, as is often the case with premature infants.

The formula provided by INFANT also helps mothers avoid weaning newborns on cow's milk, which can irritate and even destroy the lining of infants' intestines, says Dr. Michael Eisenfeld, of the Northwestern Medical Facility Foundation. He

adds that babies not nursed or fed proper formula in the first six months can become anemic from an iron deficiency that can hinder development.

The cost of formula is daunting to many mothers. A case of six one-quart cans costs between \$12 and \$14. A six-month-old drinks about a case a week.

Formula is available through the federal government's Women, Infant, Children (WIC) program, administered through the Illinois Department of Public Aid, and nearly 36,000 Chicago babies receive formula through the program. However, the required paperwork can cause several-week delays obtaining the formula, social service officials say.

"A lot of times babies go

hungry. You hate to say it, but it's true," says Sister Janice Dwyer, of Marillac House, a West Side social service center. INFANT's efforts allow Dwyer's staff to provide mothers with formula long before it usually becomes available from WIC.

Adrienne Washington, a resident of the St. Martin de Porres House of Hope, a shelter for homeless women and children in Uptown, feeds her two-month-old son formula donated by INFANT.

"I'm thankful these people are thinking of me," says Washington. "If I didn't have it, I'd have to steal it. I can't let my child starve."

Conceived in January, 1983, INFANT relies mainly on small donations, though it has received grant money, including support from the Trader's Foundation, the charitable arm of the Chicago Board of Trade. About 97 percent of INFANT's donations go directly for formula. Workers volunteer their time.

At Rainbow House-Arco Iris, a shelter for battered women and children on the Southwest Side, INFANT members have earned the moniker "the milk ladies."

"When they show up, the residents here sparkle," says Veronica Robinson, coordinator of residential services. "[It shows] our mothers that their babies do matter, and that people do care."

For more information: INFANT, Inc., 6926 N. Kolmar Ave., Lincolnwood, 60646; 708-674-3217, evenings.

Lawrence Shulruff