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COVA celebrates 25 years

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Judy Braun has seen great changes in the field of mental health since she founded the Center of Vocational Alternatives (COVA) 25 years ago.

At that time, Braun said, there was such a stigma attached to mental illness that those who had conditions could not find jobs as the mental health system de-institutionalized and mental illness sufferers were integrated into society.

"There was this big void for work, and there was a lot of misunderstanding about persons with mental illness," Braun said.

COVA will celebrate its 25th anniversary Thursday night from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. at its offices, 3770 N. High St. The event is being dubbed a "homecoming," as former staff members and past participants in COVA's programs have been invited back to celebrate.

A worker in the mental health field in the early 1980s, Braun saw that need and sought to open Serv-a-Co, COVA's predecessor, to provide janitorial jobs to people with mental illnesses.

Serv-a-Co found positions for its clients and supervised them while they worked.

At the time, Braun said people with mental illnesses largely were put to work in sheltered workshops, where work was brought in to them. There were very few opportunities for work in the community.

"It was pretty progressive at the time to take people out into the community," Braun said. "Now, it's different."

Braun started Serv-a-Co with a \$40,000 grant. In its first year, the organization had a staff of five people who helped to find jobs for 15 adults with mental illnesses. In the past 25 years, COVA has grown to have an annual budget of \$4-million. It has 60 staff members and serves 2,500 people a year.

Looking back, Braun said she never expected Serv-a-Co to grow to offer the many services that COVA now does.

"It was just: get something started because there was such a passion and such a need," Braun said. "When you start something up, you're just thinking about survival and the next week and the next payroll."

COVA now serves both adults and youth, and serves people not only with mental illnesses but with developmental and physical disabilities.

The center, which moved to Clintonville in 2002, also provides resources to people re-entering the work force, including training classes, counseling and a computer lab, where program participants can look up information on jobs with the help of COVA staffers.

In addition to the program it offers in its center, COVA also provides benefits consulting to clients in 63 counties across Ohio. Under that program, COVA helps those entering the work force figure out how government benefits will transition with them into jobs.

"Those are all the things that can help people begin to think about returning to work," Braun said of COVA's programs. "You have to extend opportunities to people to get them to think about that."

The employment opportunities also have opened up for people with mental illnesses in the last 25 years, Braun said. COVA participants now are able to look for jobs better suited to them, which Braun said makes them more likely to keep those jobs.

After 25 years, COVA continues to grow.

For the first time, COVA will now offer evening hours, which Braun said she hopes will lead to increased programming for the community.

All of the growth that COVA continues to see, Braun said, is largely due to continued growth in funding sources.

"When you have that, you can keep on growing," Braun said.