

EOC of Suffolk still meeting diverse needs after 50 years

July 24, 2017 By Miya Jones miya.jones@newsday.com



Songhi Scott, left, and Adrian Fassett of the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk at the agency's Patchogue headquarters on July 20, 2017. (Credit: Johnny Milano)

Guns and gangs, AIDS and access — the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk has faced it all, providing assistance and education to those in need for the past 50 years and adapting to changing times.

The agency opened its doors on May 5, 1967, in Amityville and now works out of Patchogue. In September, the council will celebrate its golden anniversary with a gala celebration.

“We started as safety net,” said Adrian Fassett, who has been president of the Economic Opportunity Council since 1992. “Then we realized that we

were seeing the same people each year. Then we would see their kids and their kids, so we changed the model to a more self-sufficiency model.”

Its mission is to help low-income families and individuals by providing education and economic opportunities.

Patchogue Mayor Paul Pontieri, who has worked with Fassett for several years, including with youth programs, called the council an asset to the “economically diverse community.”

“They do things quietly, in the right way,” Pontieri said.

Manuel Roias, 45, of Riverhead, who participated in the agency’s Family Planning and Development Program, said he had been incarcerated and struggled with addiction before program coordinator Jose Veliz and worker Michele Martin-Lucas helped him reconnect with his daughter and find housing. They also provided transportation for medical appointments.

“They were there every step of the way,” Roias said. “They were there to be a voice of reason and gave me smart three-month, six-month goals. They introduced me to that and I owe thanks to them.”

Delores Quintyne, 83, of Amityville, who worked with the council as an advocate starting in the late 1960s, recalled the organization’s challenges. Financial struggles in the 1980s led to a dwindling staff.

“We were doing two jobs instead of one, sometimes three,” Quintyne said of the remaining staff. “But we maintained and kept going.”

The agency now has 196 employees and has assisted 20,000 people this year, Fassett said.

Funding for the Economic Opportunity Council comes from Federal Community Services Block Grants, according to the agency’s website. The agency also receives funding from the towns of Islip and Babylon, the state Department of Health, United Way and other organizations.

Fassett said that in the 1990s, the agency shifted its focus to help people and families affected by HIV/AIDS, which led to the creation of the Targeted Prevention and Supportive Service Program to provide patients with referrals for testing and transportation, and offer education and awareness training to the public.

Now, with gun violence becoming a broad community concern, the council started the SNUG Violence Prevention Program. SNUG — GUNS spelled backward — is an initiative to reduce and prevent shootings and gang violence.

“We have been quite successful,” said project coordinator Debra Sterling. “SNUG is successful because of credible messengers who may have been incarcerated, and they have turned their lives around for the better and people really pay attention to that.”