

Any baby can - Agency assists families with special needs

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Patricia Johnson was about to hit rock bottom.

Her husband had walked out on her.

Her youngest child, 6-month-old Rowena, was on an apnea machine to monitor breathing and doctors were discussing the possibility of surgery.

The rent was so far behind that Johnson and her children - Rowena, 19-month-old Stacey Johnson, and 10-year-old Terry Jackson - were on the verge of being evicted.

Then, during a visit to the Texas Department of Human Services, she glanced over at the bulletin board and saw a flier touting a new nonprofit agency that offered help to families with chronically ill or disabled children.

"I went home and called them right away," says Johnson. "They came out that day with a check for my rent. It was just a blessing."

Any Baby Can, which has provided help to thousands of families in San Antonio for more than a decade, moved into Austin in February to offer free resource and referral to families with children who require constant medical attention or have some special need.

The goal is to hook families up with existing groups in the community that provide the services they need. But when those services aren't available, Any Baby Can staffers step in and fill the gap.

For the Johnsons, that meant immediate assistance with rent to keep the family from being tossed out on the streets. After that crisis was averted, case worker Mary Hurst stepped back in to see what kind of long-term help was needed to stabilize Johnson and Rowena's family life.

Rowena needed a crib, playpen and diapers. Sometimes her mom just needed someone to talk to about her struggle to care for a medically fragile child while going through the emotional turmoil of her divorce.

"It's very hard with three children because I'm doing it all by myself," says Johnson. "They (Any Baby Can) have been and continue to be there for me."

Karin McCullough, area director for Austin, says the agency not only finds services, but advocates for families and helps cut through bureaucratic red tape.

There is no income criteria for the program. Any family living in Travis County with a medically fragile or special-needs child, ages 0-12, qualifies. McCullough says while there are no hard statistics, it is estimated that about 2,500 chronically ill or disabled children live in Travis County.

"Our motto is that any child can reach maximum potential if given a chance," says McCullough. "That chance may mean giving families the support to get through a particular situation. We believe that a child can be saved without losing the family. And that, in a world of high-tech medicine, families of chronically ill children need high touch."

The organization, which receives funding through the Texas Department of Health's Chronically-Ill and Disabled Children's Bureau, also works with local politicians and groups to create services that are lacking in the community. For instance, McCullough says, while Austin has a lot of resources for families, it lacks adequate respite services for sick and disabled children.

"Sometimes a family needs someone to come in and watch their child for an afternoon while one parent spends time with another child, runs errands, cleans the house or just gets away for quality time on (his or her) own," says McCullough. "Or sometimes they need someone to stay with a child for a weekend when the family has to get away for either a vacation or a family emergency. There aren't a lot of these services in the community right now."

Another area where more services for children with disabilities are needed is summer and day camps, she says. Any Baby Can is working with the Association for Retarded Citizens-Austin and Easter Seal to develop these programs over the next few years.

Since opening its doors in February, Any Baby Can has provided rent and utility assistance, grocery funds, children's furniture, formula, diapers, medical equipment, credit counseling and support services to 67 families. It has referred many more to other existing services in the community.

While it welcomes donations, McCullough says what the group really needs is to get the word out to families in need.

"Tell a neighbor," she says. "Even if a family calls and is not eligible for our services, we still look for resources for them and check back to make sure they are where they need to be."

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For information, call Any Baby Can at 454-3743. The organization, located at 3724 Jefferson St., Suite 111, will accept donations of children's furniture, diapers (especially larger sizes), infant clothes (especially 0-6 months for

premature babies), car seats, toys and any children's accessories. Volunteers are needed to help put up fliers and deliver materials around town.

- **CITATION(AGLC STYLE)**

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Caption:

PHOTO Ten-month-old Rowena Johnson is among children helped by **Any Baby Can**, a support center that **assists families with** chronically ill and **special-needs** children.

Any Baby Can, which moved to Austin in February, provided rent and other assistance to Patricia Johnson, her son Stacey, left, and her daughter Rowena.

Lynne Dobson

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