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JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Ric Spee, 80, started volunteering at Crisis Clinic in 1977 as a way to help others. "People need validation for why they're feeling so crummy," says Spee, a grandmother.

Crisis Clinic

The service began in 1964 and is one of the nation's oldest crisis phone lines. It offers counseling and intervention for any emotional crisis, 24 hours a day, year round.

24-hour crisis line: 206-461-3222 or 866-4CRISIS (866-427-4747)

Volunteer information: www.crisisclinic.org/volunteer.html

Call made for Crisis Clinic volunteers

By Kyung M. Song

Seattle Times health reporter

For the past 30 years, Ric Spee has answered the telephone when desperate strangers call.

Every Wednesday evening from a desk at the Crisis Clinic in downtown Seattle, Spee listens on a headphone to people calling from all sorts of depths: Depression. Sickness. Alienation. Poverty. Shame. Loneliness.

The 80-year-old grandmother talks to them with a soft voice that conveys empathy without commiserating. Spee's weekly witness to distress and deprivation has sometimes frustrated her, and over the years it has changed her view on life and politics. She wouldn't think of giving up.

"People need validation for why they're feeling so crummy," Spee said.

But these days callers to Crisis Clinic are finding fewer listeners like Spee on the other end.

For the second straight year, Crisis Clinic's volunteer recruitment has fallen substantially short. The Seattle nonprofit has filled only half of its 100 openings for new recruits this year.

Last year it missed its goal by 25 percent.

Clinic managers complain that would-be volunteers are instead choosing short-term gigs, such as rehabbing homes for the needy, that offer quick gratification. But Crisis Clinic requires a longer commitment: six weeks of training and a pledge to work one shift a week for at least a year.

"This is a stressful volunteer job," said Kathleen Southwick, Crisis Clinic's executive director. "We want to make sure people have the emotional stability to hear what they hear on the line."

Donation of time

Seattle is fifth in the nation for volunteerism among large cities. More than a third of Seattle adults donate their time, averaging 56 hours a year, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, which operates AmeriCorps and other volunteer programs.

But even here, the group says, volunteers are much more apt to organize church bake sales or coach Little League than to answer calls from those who are mentally ill, suicidal or otherwise in despair.

Crisis Clinic operates a 24-hour hotline for people in emotional crisis, including layoffs, abuse, suicide and health problems.

Volunteer applicants at Crisis Clinic attend over 55 hours of intense trainings. Only volunteers who are nonjudgmental, who project warmth on the phone and who really listen to the callers make the cut, said Don Kuch, the clinical director.

Crisis Clinic volunteers do not counsel or advise callers. Instead they listen, ask questions, suggest referrals and, whenever possible, help callers find their own way out of their predicaments.

Last year, about 200 volunteers answered more than 95,000 calls. Nearly half of the calls are less than five minutes long. Call volumes tend to be highest on Wednesdays and lowest on Saturdays.

Air of sensibility

It's Wednesday evenings that Spee drives from her home in Edmonds to Seattle for her weekly shift. With her corduroy skirt, dark knee-high socks and oversized glasses, she has an air of sensibility that she passes along through the phone.

What callers don't hear, however, is the story of Spee's own tragedy: In 1974 her husband suffered severe brain damage in a truck accident. The couple divorced, leaving Spee a single mother with six kids. She turned to drink, and only stopped when her own children stepped in.

Back then, support groups for people with brain damage and their families weren't widely available. In fact, Spee now thinks of the 1970s as a dark age when even epilepsy and multiple sclerosis were considered shameful illnesses.

Spee started volunteering at Crisis Clinic in 1977 as a way to help others. She has listened to homeless men futilely inquiring about places to bed down for the night. She knows mothers who are afraid of their drug-addicted sons. She hears from regulars — many of them with mental and personality disorders — who are estranged from family and friends. They dial Crisis Clinic because they have no one else.

"You realize how small some of your problems are," Spee said.

It's a weekly litany of social ills — and what Spee considers the public's general obliviousness to them. But she returns without fail each week, trying at least to do her part.

"For me it's a very simple thing to do: What a difference one person can make to another," she said.

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