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Mustard to retire from Voluntary Action Center

BY JANESE SILVEY

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She has handed out Christmas presents to needy families, lunches to kids who don't get school meals in the summertime, fans to those without air conditioning and awards to community members who volunteer.

Now, Cindy Mustard is ready to hand over her title as executive director of the Voluntary Action Center. She will retire Oct. 15.

"I've been there 20 years and have worked in social services since 1965," Mustard, 67, said. "It seemed like it was about time."

The Voluntary Action Center has swelled in recognition and program offerings during her tenure. On Mustard's watch, VAC added the Lunch in the Park program that serves meals to children when school is not in session. There's a Christmas in July event that gives families a free dinner and an off-season visit from Santa. A decade ago, Mustard teamed up with the Tribune to hand out Hero Awards to local volunteers each year. She organized an annual school supply drive to get pencils, paper and other necessities into the hands of students. And she created the Youth Enrichment Fund that doles out scholarships to let boys and girls participate in clubs and activities they otherwise couldn't afford.

The focus on children has had a ripple effect.

"Lunch in the Park, the holiday family program — all of those things make a huge difference," said Michelle Baumstark, spokeswoman for Columbia Public Schools. "Children who don't have basic needs, it makes it really hard for them to come to school and learn."

VAC does not receive money from the state, so it doesn't have to follow government guidelines. That flexibility has allowed VAC to fund less-traditional needs, such as hot water heaters, tarps for leaky roofs and car rental fees.

"We can look at each individual and don't have regulations that say if you make \$1 over" income guidelines, "you can't get services," Mustard said. "That fills a niche in the community."

A Hickman High School and University of Missouri graduate, Mustard worked for the Division of Family Services and a youth development program in Kansas City before returning to Columbia. She worked for the American Cancer Society for three years here before the VAC job.

It's tough to picture someone else in that position, said Teresa Maledy, president of Commerce Bank. "She is so compassionate and willing to collaborate with other people and organizations in the community," Maledy said. "I really think she helps multiply the effectiveness of VAC and other organizations. She's really an icon in our community."

About a dozen people have applied for the director position, and VAC hopes to have a replacement named by September, Mustard said. After a month of training, Mustard said she'll take a break from the center, although she'll still be active in community groups.

Serving at the helm of VAC has been a dream job, Mustard said. "You get to work with so many segments of the population. You're working with those who need services and volunteers giving services and people from all income levels...It gives you a good perspective on life in Columbia."

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