# New group aims to boost San Clemente social services

**By BRITTANY LEVINE**

Some people in San Clemente have been left out of the loop of available services because their needs are going unheard, according to leaders of a new group called San Clemente Collaborative, which held its first general meeting Wednesday night at the Boys & Girls Club. The group's main goal, its leaders say, is to get people from varying groups to use their expertise to help improve San Clemente social services.

The Human Affairs Committee – the city's current advisory body on community needs – has no real powers, and the dozens of nonprofit organizations in San Clemente have no unifying core, leaders of the new group say. That might have been fine about two decades ago when the city set up the committee, the leaders say, but San Clemente has gone through some growing pains and needs new ways to cope with its developing and diverse population, which census figures indicate has grown about 50 percent since 2000 (from 41,000 then to about 61,000 in 2008). "Things need to change as times change," said Leslie Davis, senior housing developer for the city and a leader of San Clemente Collaborative.

The collaborative is an umbrella group that brings together representatives of the city, nonprofits, businesses, civic groups, the county and residents to address community issues. It is not a recognized nonprofit in its own right and will not raise its own money. But it will help raise money for community needs and nonprofit groups, organizers say. "When we were just a small town, everybody knew everybody and it was easy for the seven people (on the Human Affairs Committee) to cover what we needed. But the city's gotten bigger," said Joan Thompson, a Human Affairs Committee member and a San Clemente Collaborative leader.

A quarter of the population makes less than $35,000 a year and struggles to make ends meet, Davis said. Homeless people and disadvantaged pregnant women have to travel to other cities such as Mission Viejo to get low-cost services, she said. The collaborative wants to change that. But it hasn't been smooth sailing for the group, which has been in the making since community-outreach officials at Saddleback Memorial and Mission hospitals conducted a survey years ago that identified gaps in human services available in San Clemente.

This summer, the Human Affairs Committee tried to disband and hand over its functions to the collaborative. The City Council said no. "We're going to keep the Human Affairs Committee going, and if the collaborative gets off the ground, it will be a hugely valuable resource for the Human Affairs Committee," Mayor Lori Donchak said in an interview Wednesday. She also said the council thinks the committee should be an adviser, allowing the collaborative to take on a more activist role.

Though Wednesday's meeting – attended by 55 people – was the first for the general body, collaborative leaders have been working for a while toward several tangible goals. Its neighborhood committee, headed by the city's grant director, Denise Obrero, has received and used a $10,000 Lowe's Heroes Grant to restore Family Assistance Ministries' kitchen and help other nonprofit-led community centers. The committee last week applied for a private $60,000 grant to promote intergenerational projects like a community garden.

"We are always looking for potential community grants to help foster these goals we've set," Obrero said. Private grants are considered especially important in light of budgetary restrictions at City Hall.

"The HAC could make the city aware (of a problem), but the city can't always act on it because of budgetary or philosophical reasons," Thompson said. The collaborative will help direct nonprofits and individuals to the right resources as well as help organize community members for grassroots initiatives, she said.

San Clemente is not the first city to build such a collaborative. It is modeled after existing groups in Fullerton, Santa Ana and Huntington Beach, Thompson said. However, San Clemente is one of the only cities in south Orange County to do this. The next step is to find other community members to help carry out the mission, said Jan Sener, the collaborative chairwoman, who recently fell victim to budget cuts when she was laid off from her job as director of crime-prevention services for the Orange County Sheriff's Department. "We need more bodies," Sener said.



*Eleven-year-olds Unique Young, left, and Lucy Bege help Mary Anna Anderson, president of the Beaches, Parks and Recreation Foundation, sign up for more information at the San Clemente Collaborative's first general meeting Wednesday night.*
BRITTANY LEVINE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## San Clemente Collaborative

The collaborative is split into three committees: youth, health and neighborhood outreach:

• The youth committee plans to identify gaps in youth programs brought on partially by state and district budget cuts to several after-school programs.

• The health committee plans to increase access to existing health services and increase free mental-health programs.

• The neighborhood committee plans to help residents it deems underserved and to organize community building events.

For more information, contact Jan Sener at 949-361-8213 or senerj@san-clemente.org.

## Resource center?

Where will all the San Clemente Collaborative's collaboration take place?

San Clemente Presbyterian Church is working to create a resource center downtown that would be open to the whole community, said Paul Henry, a church representative and San Clemente Collaborative leader.

"If these are the players," Henry said of the collaborative's members, "this will be their playground."

Henry, whose day job is in real estate, said the center is years away from being built. But he envisions about 5,000 square feet with WIC (Women, Infants and Children) and mental-health services available. It also would have volunteers to direct residents to the right people in the collaborative to help them with their needs.