

Safe haven

The Central Valley Ronald McDonald House provides a support center for families with critically ill children.

BY CLAUDIA D. NEWCORN

THE MOMENT A PARENT IS told his or her child is suffering a life-threatening illness, a floodgate of intense, unfamiliar emotions opens up to them. Suddenly, the parent is confronted with anger, fear, sadness or despair and must learn to cope with those issues, as well as keep the family afloat emotionally and perhaps, financially.

For some, the monetary strain of medical bills, even with health insurance, may be staggering. Add to that the price of food, transportation and lodging — if the family is forced to be away from home — and the costs could become overwhelming.

The nonprofit Ronald McDonald House (RMH) of the Central Valley offers a fellowship of hope to such families in need. McDonald's restaurants supported the original House that opened in 1974 in Philadelphia. The houses have since been named for Ronald McDonald, the delightful clown who brings happiness to children of all ages.

There are currently six houses operating in California. The Central Valley house opened in Fresno in 1984 and is the only residence in the Central Valley dedicated exclusively to providing support and services for families with critically ill children. The RMH serves nine counties: Kern, Madera, Merced, Mariposa, Kings, Tulare, Fresno, San Luis Obispo and Stanislaus.

More than 80 percent of the families who stay at the House come from Kern. "Our goal is to create a home away from home for families," explains Marty Flaming, president of the Ronald McDonald House board. "It's very rewarding to be able to help families with serious problems and give them a place to stay where they can share hopes and fears with other parents who understand. Despite their sadness, we try to bring a little bright light into their lives."

Located one mile north of the old Valley Children's



House manager Carla Rodriguez reads to 22-month-old Adalina Gonzales, shown with her parents, Robbi and Andrew Gonzales.



Hospital, the current House can accommodate up to eight families for a voluntary fee of \$10 per night per family, but it is 20 minutes away from the new Valley Children's Hospital. Growing demand — more than 500 families per year — keeps the house constantly full, and families are turned away, a situation unacceptable to Flaming. "Expansion at the present location is not possible, and we have begun a fund-raising campaign for a new facility to be established next to the new Valley Children's Hospital in Madera, so parents can have peace of mind knowing they're right next door to their children. The plan is for 16 bedrooms, with room for future growth and expansion to 14,900 square feet versus our present 6,000. We hope to move in late 2000 or early 2001."

As a nonprofit organization, the House depends completely on gifts. The fund-raising drive solicits communities and counties for financial support, as well as in-kind donations for construction. "All of it goes to help others," emphasizes Flaming. "Each contribution lets us create an environment that helps reduce the anxiety of the family and child by allowing them to spend more time together. The goal of the Ronald McDonald House is to help keep the parents' minds off their troubles — if only for a little while." ♦

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Ronald McDonald House is gratefully accepting donations toward the construction of the new facility. Food, videos, toys, carpets, tiling, cabinetry, money or gifts of any kind will help make the house a place of hope for families in difficult situations. For more information, please call Carla Rodriguez, House manager, or Patty Manfredi, development fund director, at 559-224-1280. Write to Ronald McDonald House, 4291 N. Millbrook, Fresno, Calif., 93726.