

Contact Centre crisis because of funds shortage

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald staff writer
The North Halton Contact Centre is short of both funds and volunteers to man its 24-hour distress phone, and without either one of those, the centre could be forced to close its doors permanently.

In the six years since the centre began operating, the distress line has been open continuously, 24 hours a day, without a halt. Last week, for the first time, it appeared like that the service would have to be shut down for a few hours because there weren't enough volunteers to answer the phones. Fortunately, enough volunteers were found, and the service was able to continue uninterrupted.

But the situation is more critical than that. A spokesman for the centre, Cathy Hulley, said that unless 20 to 25 volunteers enlist in the fall training program, the centre will have to reduce its 24-hour a day service because there won't be enough volunteers to handle the calls.

And without additional funds, the centre may have to close down permanently by the end of December. Mrs. Hulley said the contact centre needs "hundreds of dollars" to be put into the centre's operating budget. Although the centre is admini-

stered and staffed by volunteers, the money is needed for the operating budget including rent and facilities.

NO FUND-RAISING
Because of the nature of the contact centre, where volunteers must remain anonymous, the centre can't hold fund-raising events where members organize public activities, the way other groups can, Mrs. Hulley said. The volunteers must remain anonymous, so they can be protected from possible harassment, and so that callers can be assured that the service is entirely confidential, Mrs. Hulley said.

The centre now has about 50 volunteers answering phones, but needs at least 70 to run comfortably, particularly through the holiday season, Mrs. Hulley said. The centre has had many good young volunteers, she said, but several of the younger ones marry and move away, and the last training course didn't bring out as many new volunteers as the centre had hoped.

A volunteer needs to be a caring person, who has a minimum of 12 hours a month to answer the phone, Mrs. Hulley said. The new volunteers would also find it helpful to attend the monthly meetings where volunteers provide assistance and support to each

other, and discuss ways of handling different problems.

Mrs. Hulley emphasized that specific problems of people who call the centre are not discussed at meetings, except in the most general of terms, and that extreme care is taken to preserve the anonymity of the callers.

"A volunteer has to be somebody who knows how, or who can learn how, to listen," Mrs. Hulley said. "In the training courses, we have to teach volunteers what not to say. We are non-judgemental. We don't make judgements, like telling young people, 'taking drugs is wrong.' We might say, 'tell me how you got into this situation.' We encourage them to talk."

TRAINING COURSE
Volunteers take a six-week training course, one night a week, before they go near a phone, and once they complete the training course, they have an experienced volunteer with them when they actually begin answering the phone, Mrs. Hulley said.

One of the hardest things for a volunteer to learn is how not to take the calls home with them, Mrs. Hulley said. Volunteers have to be something like doctors, and learn to dissociate themselves from the calls at the end of a shift, she said.

Callers must be empathetic, but they can't get too involved, she added.

Mrs. Hulley said she feels there is a great need locally for the service the centre. The centre has gone from answering 1,000 calls a year to 3,000 calls a year over its six years of operation, she said.

Nearly half the calls are from lonely people who call on a regular basis, Mrs. Hulley said. Some of the calls are from people who are suicidal, and some are from people just looking for information. The calls for information range from questions about social service agencies in the area to people wanting to know what shows are playing at the local movie theatre.

Mrs. Hulley said the centre doesn't discourage people from calling for any reasons, because those calling with a routine inquiry will feel able to call if they should be in distress.

The centre gets calls from Georgetown, Acton, Toronto, Hamilton, Richmond Hill, Bramalea and a number of relatively distant places, Mrs. Hulley said. When a telephone operator gets a call from someone in distress who needs to talk to someone immediately, he or she has a list of the

phone numbers of distress centres in the surrounding areas. The operator goes down the list until she reaches a free number.

DON'T ASK
"We never ask a caller's name, but we might ask what area they're from, so that we can recommend a service or an agency from their area," Mrs. Hulley said. "We don't want to recommend an agency in Milton to someone who lives in Toronto."

Another of the services which the centre has more or less taken over on behalf of the public health unit, is the periodic phone calls to certain people, to make sure they are in good health. If the person doesn't answer the phone, the contact centre has a number to call so that a neighbour or friend can check on the person and make sure the person is all right.

The contact centre also does some work for other local groups, including the Big Bro-

thers organization, the Red Cross, Alcoholics Anonymous, Meals on Wheels and the Mothers' Self Help group.

The centre has operated with grants from the federal and provincial government in the past, but it is now funded entirely at the local level, Mrs. Hulley said. The federal government handed out grants for summer students, who updated records on local organizations for three years running, Mrs. Hulley said, but this year the grant request was turned down.

The provincial government

gave the centre a grant to operate an information service distributing brochures and pamphlets, but the centre executive decided to forego the grant because the centre created extra work for the volunteers and didn't seem to be reaching the general public.

Mrs. Hulley said the centre is appealing to local industry, service clubs, church groups, sororities, the towns of Halton Hills and Milton, and to individuals for funds to continue the operation of the centre.

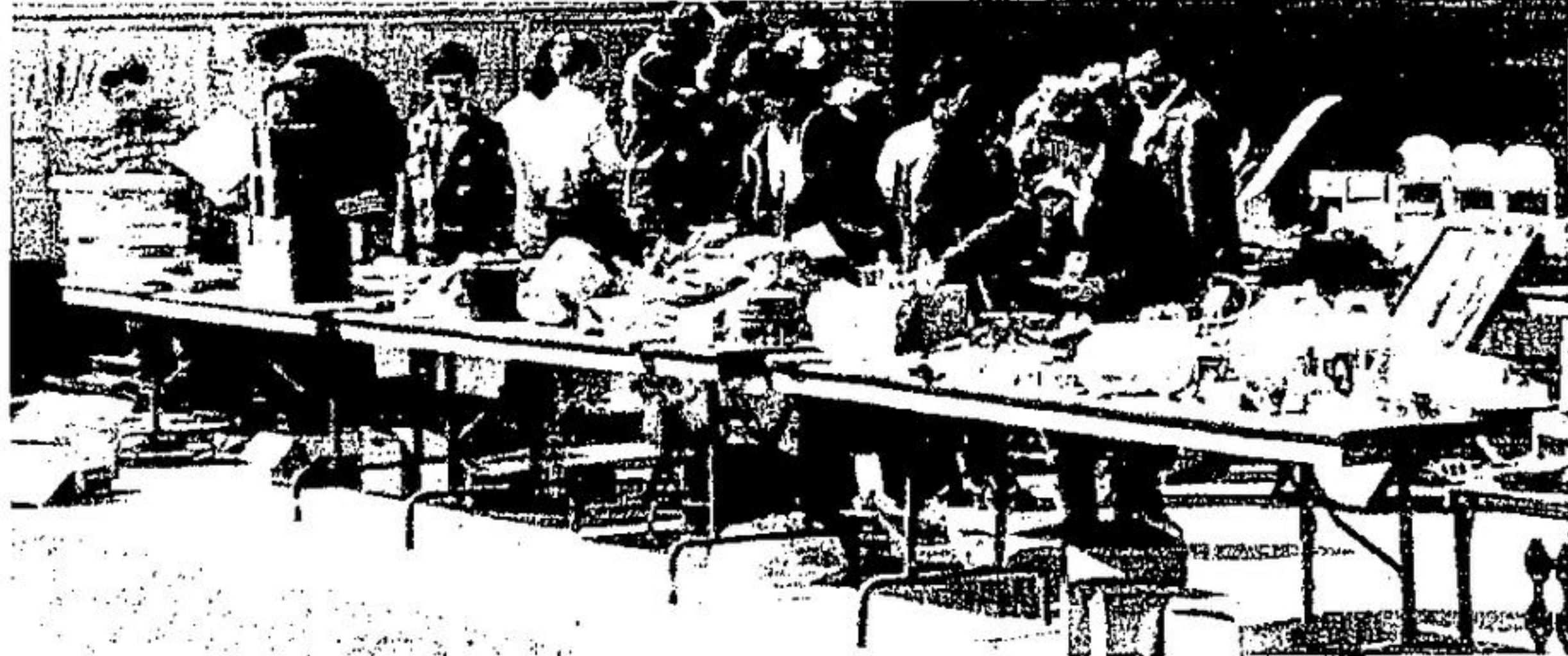
FEEL LOSS
"People would feel the loss

of the contact centre if it wasn't there," she said.

Mrs. Hulley said anyone wishing to make a donation to the contact centre can send the donation to the North Halton Contact Centre, Post Office Box 85, Georgetown. Anyone wishing to act as a volunteer can call the contact centre at 877-1211.

"We feel it's worthwhile, otherwise we wouldn't be doing it," she said. "Everybody gets some kind of satisfaction out of this work."

The next training course for volunteers starts in October.



BARGAIN HUNTERS

Six families got together Sunday to hold a garage sale on Cleaveholm Drive. The sale was a success, judging by attendance, and featured the usual diversity of items to be found

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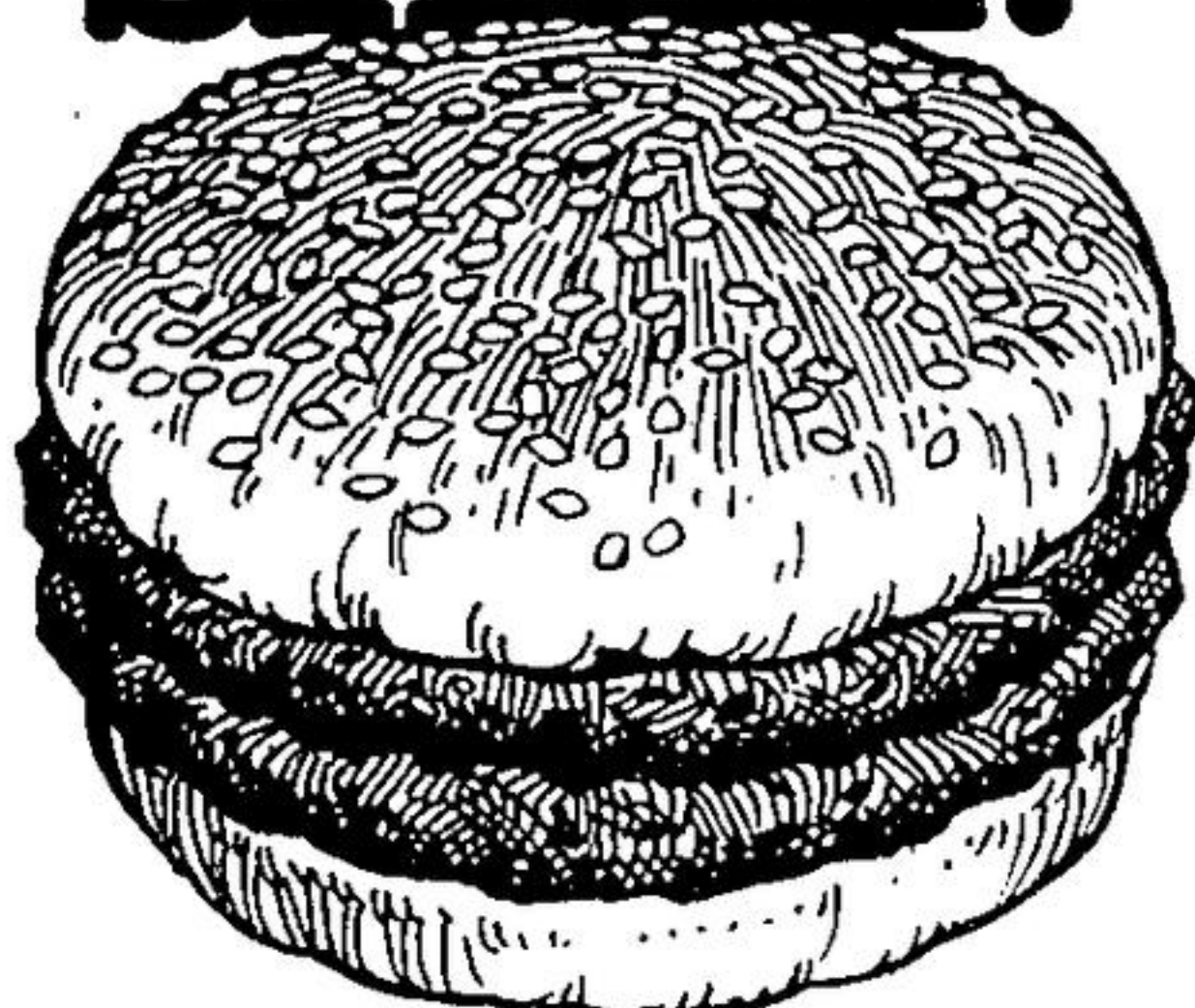
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