



DECADES OF SERVICE:
Karen Rodden first began working at NRVCS in December 1975.

(Photo - Mike Wade/NRVCS)

Long-time employee reflects on agency's history

By **Mike Wade / NRVCS**
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BLACKSBURG - Although she hasn't been around for NRVCS' entire 50-year history, Karen Rodden has been a constant and reliable presence at the agency for more than four decades.

Her first day on the job was December 15, 1975. Gerald Ford was President at the time, the Oldsmobile Cutlass was the top-selling automobile of the year, and VHS tapes wouldn't be introduced to the market for another year.

Clearly, the world is much different than it was back then, but Rodden's motivation to come to work every day hasn't changed at all. She genuinely cares about others.

In fact, her voice is often the one on the other end of the line when someone calls NRVCS seeking assistance with a mental health or substance use disorder, or other issue related to behavioral health.

She has held a number of different positions with the agency, but Rodden has spent the past decade as a case manager - in what's often referred to as "the phone room" at NRVCS' Blacksburg office - the central hub of activity for crisis calls, initial appointments, and calls for information and referral.

"Technically, I could have already retired but I really do enjoy helping people," explains Rodden. "It feels good knowing that I can have an impact - even in some small way - in helping get people what they need."

Rodden's first role with the agency was in administration. She admits that she quickly became bored with that particular job and was eager to become more involved with direct services. Her interest in mental health, she says, was originally sparked by some classes she took while attending Radford College (now University).

"Those classes really made it interesting for me," she recalls. "Plus, I've always just found the mind and the brain to be fascinating."

Rodden points out that the agency only had about 20 staff when she first started (in contrast to the nearly 800 employees currently on NRVCS' payroll) and that there were very few services provided to persons

Looking back (and ahead) with former NRVCS board member, chair

By Mike Wade / NRVCS
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FLOYD - Bill Gardner is truly a staple of the Floyd community. In addition to his long career with the county's public school system, Gardner has served on countless committees and workgroups to support a variety of local charities and causes - including two different stints on the NRVCS Board of Directors.

Gardner's first appointment to the agency's board came in the mid-1970's, not long after the organization had been established. He was eventually elected as the board's chair and held that seat from January 1982 until June of 1983.

Some twenty years later, the Floyd County Board of Supervisors would re-appoint Gardner to serve on the NRVCS Board a second time. Gardner eventually stepped down in the fall of 2013.

"In the early years of my time with the board, it seemed like we were constantly scrambling about to get funds," Gardner recalls. "There were also a lot of issues between the mental health side and the substance abuse side." (*Editor's note: The agencies in the New River Valley that provided services for individuals with mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and developmental disabilities were separate entities until they eventually merged in the late 1980's to make up what is now NRVCS.*)

"Fortunately, those issues were eventually resolved and it just kept getting better," notes Gardner.

He went on to say that he is continually impressed by both the availability and scope of services offered by the agency today.

"Once upon a time, we were pushing for really just services here [Floyd County]," Gardner went on to say. "It was a real fight to even get a counselor here once a week."

"The array of services that is available now is just wonderful," he adds. "So, that's definitely been a big change."

Because of his work in the schools, Gardner says he's especially appreciative of NRVCS' expanded efforts to serve children and teens.

"Overall, I think the services that NRVCS provides are received well in the community," he notes. "It's certainly much



Bill Gardner | Photo - M. Wade/NRVCS

more accepted to seek out services than it once was."

While individuals in need might be more open to addressing their behavioral health issues, Gardner acknowledges that those needs also tend to be greater - if not more difficult to address - than in the past.

"The issues around substance use have clearly had an impact on not just our community but society in general," he explains. "There's also been an erosion of the basic family structure that has compounded those problems."

In looking back on his time with the NRVCS Board of Directors, Gardner says he's grateful for the experience - even if it did come with some challenges.

"It was a real education - no question about it," he adds. "Those early days especially were a real lesson in boardmanship and it was a good experience for future service opportunities."

"You can only go on and serve on a board like that with an open mind," continues Gardner. "It was frustrating early on because it felt like things were moving so slow when it came to getting services into our community."

"At the same time, you definitely appreciate things more when you know that you've worked so hard to get them," he adds.

NRVCS Board Chairs

1969 - Present

DR. FRAUGHTON G. FORD
September 1969 - July 1970

ROSWELL E. ROUND
August 1970 - January 1972

FRANK A. SCOTT
February 1972 - January 1974

KARL E. BREN
January 1976 - December 1976

ANTHONY W. ANNESKI
February 1977 - December 1978

KATHLEEN R. INGHAM
January 1979 - December 1979

JUANITA K. SNIPES
January 1980 - December 1981

W. R. "BILL" GARDNER, JR.
January 1982 - June 1983

DORIS T. ABRAHAM
July 1983 - June 1984

JOHN J. GILL
July 1984 - June 1985

S. DALE PROFITT
July 1985 - June 1987

HAROLD ABSHER, JR.
July 1987 - June 1988

PAUL M. BARNETT
July 1988 - June 1989

JAMES C. WALLIS
July 1989 - June 1991

E. CURTIS "SKIP" SCHWAB
July 1991 - June 1993

JEAN BOURNE
July 1993 - June 1995

GLORIA "SANDY" ROBERTS
July 1995 - June 1997

H.A. McCREADY
July 1997 - June 1999

GERALD S. O'MORROW, Ph.D.
July 1999 - June 2001

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Rodden

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under the age of 18.

“The disabilities [disorders] were all separated back then and there were no emergency services,” Rodden adds.

Because she was responsible for preparing forensic evaluations (something she did for 21 years as part of her regular job duties), Rodden points out that she was the first employee at NRVCS to get a work computer.

“It certainly made things a lot easier,” she says, “but I really enjoyed doing those... there were a number of very interesting, high-profile cases that I worked on.”

Rodden eventually transitioned into an administrative support role with the agency’s mental health services team (which would later become known as ‘Access Services’). She worked directly under Harvey Barker who would later go on to serve as NRVCS’ Executive Director.

“I really enjoyed working with Harvey,” Rodden recalls. “He saw me as an equal and we worked really well together.”

As much as she has enjoyed her other roles with NRVCS, Rodden says her current job is her favorite.

“No two calls are alike,” she explains. “I think since the Virginia Tech tragedy, our agency has been much more visible in the community and we’ve seen a huge increase in the number of calls we receive because people know us as a reliable referral source.”

Given her years of experience, Rodden has developed an uncanny knack for anticipating increases in the volume of calls that come into the phone room.

“There’s definitely truth to the whole thing about full moons and new moons,” she says, “and we tend to get a higher number of calls during the holidays - primarily related to grief - because that can be a really difficult time for a lot of people.”

Rodden, who has held on to every one of her paper desk calendars from her time at NRVCS, points out that Virginia’s Medicaid expansion has also kept the phone lines busy in recent months.

“People are calling up and they are genuinely excited about Medicaid because many of them have told us that they haven’t been able to access treatment for years because they didn’t have insurance,” notes Rodden. “It’s exciting to be able to connect those folks to services, but it’s also taken a toll.”

While she feels stigma toward mental health and substance use disorders still ex-



FLASHBACK: The Access Services Unit at NRVCS, in a file photo dated April 30, 1997. Karen Rodden (circled) served as the unit’s administrative assistant for 27 years.

ists, she’s encouraged by the fact that people are willing to be more open about their struggles.

“Oh, it’s [stigma] definitely still there - and I think bullying is still an issue for young people - but it’s definitely gotten better,” Rodden continues. “I do think kids are taking the ‘if you see something, say something’ thing much more seriously.”

Rodden says she lives by the “work hard, play hard” mantra. As she finishes each work day, Rodden wastes little time in retreating to her favorite escape - music.

“I go out, get in my truck, and crank it up,” she declares. “Listening to music has always been my ‘go-to’ therapy - it soothes and revives me.”

In addition to her favorite band, The Rolling Stones, Rodden also loves to be

outdoors, gardening and working with flowers. She also enjoys shopping and spending time with friends and her pets.

Speaking of animals, Rodden is also well-known among co-workers and friends for her fondness of flamingos. When she used to have her own office, it was hard to find a square inch that wasn’t pink.

“I just think they are beautiful, elegant birds,” she says. “They’re just different - very unusual - but I also find them very relaxing to watch.”

“And pink happens to be my favorite color,” she adds with a smile. “So, why not?”

At this point, Rodden shows no signs of slowing down. Her plan is to continue working until she reaches age 70. By that point, she’ll be on the verge of celebrating a remarkable fiftieth anniversary of her own.



WIMMER BUILDING: This building, currently headquarters for the Christiansburg Police Department, was once the primary office building for NRVCS. (File Photo)



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SIGN OF CHANGE: An employee with Sign Systems, Inc. adds the street numbers to the front of NRVCS' Montgomery Center in Blacksburg, as the agency relocated its main operations to that building in the late 1990's. (File Photo)

NRVCS Board Chairs

1969 - Present

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HAROLD B. CHRISLEY

July 2001 - June 2002

JOAN G. KNODE

July 2002 - June 2004

PAM HIGGINBOTHAM

July 2004 - June 2006

REV. RICHARD GREGORY

July 2006 - June 2008

JOHN A. MUFFO

July 2008 - June 2010

VICKY COLLINS

July 2010 - June 2012

ROBERT HISS

July 2012 - May 2014

REBECCA S. "BECKY" HUBBLE

June 2014

SALLY McCARTHY

July 2014 - June 2015

JOSEPH W. YOUNG, JR.

July 2015 - June 2017

ROBERT G. "BOB" SISK

July 2017 - June 2019

MARY W. BIGGS

July 2019 - Present

NRVCS @ 50: Our Work Matters

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