

Farmers Union Green Thumb giving elderly a second chance

By JOANNE SPAHR
HARRISBURG — When someone says "National Farmers Union," what are the first words that come to mind? One hundred per cent of parity? Young Farmers Homestead Act? How about Farmers Union Green Thumb, Inc.?

If you've never heard of the last organization, you're like most people. Green Thumb is a rural community improvement and service organization that hires and finds jobs for senior citizens.

Started in 1965, it is sponsored by National Farmers Union and funded by the United States Department of Labor, Commerce, and Health, Education and Welfare; the Environmental Protection Agency, various state governments, and by over 3000 local, public, and private non-profit sponsors.

Pennsylvania has its own Green Thumb agency, which is located in Harrisburg, and is run by Orville Carver, state director.

Carver, who has been working for Green Thumb for six years, explains that the federally funded job placement service has 800 employees on its payroll. All these employees have several things in common — they all have rural backgrounds, are at least 55 years of age, have passed a medical examination, and have an annual income below the federal low income level of \$2970 per person. And they feel useful.

"If it weren't for our program, some of our employees would be dead by now," stresses Suzette Kirkland, field supervisor for Green Thumb. Although her statement seems strongly phrased, she means what she says. She adamantly defends her stand that without usefulness, the elderly can lose their will to live.

"I know it," she says. "I've seen it."

Besides placing the elderly in jobs, Suzette views Green Thumb from another angle.

"We want to keep these people out of nursing homes," she states. "We want to get to them and provide them with an income to support themselves."

The way Green Thumb works is very simple. Non-profit organizations come to the placement agency with a job which needs to be filled and Green Thumb provides them with an employee. The jobs from the non-profit organizations are normally volunteer, but when an elderly person is sent in to do the work through the program, he or she is put on the Green Thumb payroll and is paid out of the agency's \$3 million budget.

It's simple, and according to Miss Kirkland, Green Thumb is "one of the few federally funded



At the state office in Harrisburg, Orville Carver, (left) Green Thumb state director, and Suzette Kirkland, area field supervisor, confer with Grace Shreiner, office worker, on employee forms. Ms. Shreiner is a Green Thumb employee.



At the Watts-Buffalo Community Center in Perry County Green Thumb employees John Treaster, Merrill Gearhart, and W.E. Lukens work on general maintenance as their job through the Green Thumb program.

organizations which is not full of red tape."

As long as the potential enrollees are at least 55 years of age, have passed a medical examination, and have an annual income lower than the federal level, they are put to work.

On the average, they work three days a week for minimum hourly wage, and have benefits such as 11 paid holidays, two weeks vacation, and five sick days.

A big plus is that the program has no maximum age limit

"We've got people who are 90 and still working three days a week. Right now we're even considering a 104-year-old woman," exclaims Carver.

Adding to this remark, he continues, "I have seen some individuals practically on their death beds, but still working and trying to make a buck."

"They want dignity, not charity."

About 34 per cent of the enrollees are between the ages of 60 and 64, 27 per cent are 65 to 69; 12 per cent are

70 to 74; and eight per cent are more than 75, he said. Sixty-four per cent are women and minorities make up 24 per cent.

The types of jobs they are placed in include positions with education and health-related fields; hospitals, housing and rehabilitation programs; employment assistance; recreation; social services; public works, nutrition, outreach, and referral programs.

(Turn to Page 52)

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