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Patricia Kolff of Villanova, director of the National Heart Assist and Transplant Fund, points out the heart transplant centers in the United States.

Lightening the load for heart patients

By Kristin E. Holmes

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The painting that hangs on the wall in Patricia Kolff's small Lancaster Avenue office depicts four horses galloping furiously to an unseen place.

Kolff runs with the same intensity. Unlike the horses, however, she knows exactly where she's going.

As national executive director of the National Heart Assist and Transplant Fund in Haverford, Kolff is dedicated to helping heart-transplant patients and their families cope with the emotional trauma and extraordinary financial strains that accompany heart transplantation.

An estimated 2,000 heart transplants will be performed in the United States this year, according to federal data. Many of those patients don't carry adequate medical insurance to fully pay for the procedure, said Kolff, 45, of Villanova. "These are the patients that the organization seeks to help."

The Heart Assist Fund, a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization, gives small grants to the families, advises them on hospitals that perform transplants, educates and lectures to community groups on the organ-donor program and helps the transplant patient organize fund-raising campaigns.

"The largest number of heart transplant patients are the middle-aged wage-earner," Kolff said. "The family has to face all the financial and emotional anxieties surrounding decrease in income. They are confronted with the trauma of possibly having to relocate nearer a transplant center. And let's face it, they are facing death."

What further compounds the strains, Kolff said, is that when



Kolff helps ease the burden imposed by heart transplantation.

"you're offered the hope of a transplant and you're hit again if you can't afford it."

The entire transplant procedure costs between \$50,000 to \$150,000, according to Kolff. "And then when the patient is through with that ordeal — bam — there is the \$500- to \$1,000-a-month cost for medication that the patient will need for the rest of his life."

That was what frightened Charlotte Evoli, 43, of West Chester. Her husband, Philip "Bunky" Evoli has been waiting for a new heart since March.

"I read that the medication my husband will have to take for the rest of his life, after he gets his heart, will cost \$800 to \$1,500 a month," she said. "So when I heard about the Heart Assist Fund from a friend, I contacted them right away."

Philip Evoli, 45, became a transplant candidate at Temple University Hospital after suffering congestive heart failure while playing golf in March. He had his first heart attack in 1976 and has been disabled from his supervisory position at a manufacturing company since his second heart attack, three years ago.

"We think that the insurance will cover most of the cost, but we aren't sure how much. So we will use the money that's raised to cover the balance," said Philip Evoli.

The Heart Assist Fund was founded in 1983 by Kolff and her husband, Jacob Kolff, chief of cardiothoracic surgery at Temple University Hospital.

When Temple began considering whether to perform heart-transplant surgery in 1983, hospital officials wanted to know whether Temple would be reimbursed for the costs of what was then considered an experimental procedure, Kolff said.

No insurance company would make that commitment, however. And the hospital decided it could not treat patients without insurance or private funds.

The Kolffs wanted to do something to help those patients and created the National Heart Assist and Transplant Fund in 1983.

Initially based in Washington, the fund's offices were moved to Haverford, by the Kolffs in October, 1985, when the director became ill. It was then that Patricia Kolff became the organization's guiding force.

Individual funds, established with the assistance of Kolff's organization and intended to help a specific recipient, are given generic names such as

"The Miracle of Life Fund" or "The Mayfair Heart Fund." If for some reason the recipient no longer needs assistance, or does not need all of the money donated to the fund, then someone else can receive assistance from the same fund, she said.

Medical expenses are paid directly from the fund. Because the funds are structured and the money disbursed in this way, Kolff said, patients are not required to pay federal income taxes on the benefits they receive.

The organization has raised \$150,000 since moving to Haverford and has assisted 230 patients from 45 states since its inception, she said.

"That money is for patient use only," Kolff said. "The Heart Assist Fund's administrative costs are met through individual and corporate donations to the organization. Most of the money from those contributions, however, is used to give out small grants to our patients. And all donations, whether to a specific ... fund or to the Heart Assist organization, are tax deductible."

An "I Love Life Fund" was created for the Evolis. "I love" is Evoli spelled backward, Charlotte Evoli is quick to point out. The five West Chester chapters of her sorority, Beta Sigma Phi, have made the "I Love Life Fund" their service project for the year and have held a variety of fund-raising events.

"The love and support we have gotten has been beautiful," Charlotte Evoli said. "I get really excited when I think about it." But what would be even more exciting for the Evolis would be an end to Philip Evoli's six-month wait for a compatible heart.