

Arizona Daily Star

Interfaith volunteers here to help

Patty Machelor Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Monday, January 18, 2010 12:00 am

There is no time to rest, especially now.

More than 400 calls might come in during one day from people needing help. Often, with the recession, there just aren't enough dollars or volunteers to meet the tremendous need.

As you walk through the Interfaith Community Services office at 2820 W. Ina Road, there's a strong pulse among the volunteers and employees dedicated to helping as many as they can, in as many ways as they can.

Seniors, disabled adults and families in crisis are the target populations for the agency, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

What started out as a collaboration of six congregations working in a small office at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church now includes 600 volunteers and 17 staff members. Fifty religious organizations are involved, as well as the Pima Council on Aging.

Together, they provide emergency financial assistance, case management, mobile meals and emergency food boxes, in-home visits, transportation, and medical assessments and referrals. In 2009, they helped more than 36,000 people.

Enabling people to stay in their homes by providing maintenance help, transportation and meals is one of the agency's principal goals.

Andrea Rogers was a nurse for 30 years before she became coordinator of the health-advocacy program. Rogers and more than 40 volunteers do in-home assessments and home visits to help seniors stay healthy, and at home.

"This is an organization that really relies on its volunteers," said Diane Luber, development manager. "And the volunteers aren't working for the staff. We try to put volunteers in charge as much as possible."

The Rev. Barbara Anderson founded the organization in 1985 and called it the Northwest Interfaith Center.

"I was working as an associate minister at St. Andrew's, and we had numerous people who stopped at the church who needed money for getting somewhere, or for getting food," Anderson said. She made arrangements with the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, and a new food distribution point was started.

Anderson's vision was to have her agency offer services throughout Tucson. Slowly, that idea is unfolding.

The agency has moved twice and doubled in size at its current location after a remodeling was completed in 2008. There also is a small office open Monday to Thursday at 8701 E. Old Spanish Trail. Overall, the agency offers food and emergency financial assistance across Pima County, and caregiving services and healthy advocacy to much of the county.

In addition to helping people, Anderson wanted to bring faith communities together to serve the community.

"That's the focus of what we all believe, and so I thought: Why can't we just do it together and, as we do it together, learn from each other?" she said.

The Rev. Karen MacDonald, the faith outreach manager, works to further Anderson's vision by encouraging more faith communities to join.

"The thinking is that, no matter what our practice is, we are called to help people," MacDonald said.

Interfaith Community Services is now headed by Bonnie Kampa, who in 2002 became the agency's third executive director.

"I really love to see the dynamics of an organization, to see how people and processes fit together, and how you can bring people together to make something like this happen," Kampa said.

Currently, about 60,000 seniors in Pima County live at or below the poverty level, according to U.S. Census data. Poor and middle-class families alike are struggling, said Terri Patt-Smith, associate director. The Association of Arizona Food Banks estimates that one in five Arizona children lives in poverty.

"We have a lot of people who just don't know what to do," said Patt-Smith. Over the last 18 months, she said, there has been a 50 percent increase in food bank traffic. To help, Interfaith Community Services will open its food bank six days a week, including

Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., beginning Jan. 30.

Contact reporter Patty Machelor at pmachelor@azstarnet.com or 235-0308.

Learn more

Do you need help, or are you interested in volunteering? Call Interfaith Community Services at 297-6049.