



When in need, people turn to the Salvation Army for a warm meal and a roof over their head.

Organizations say they cannot take the place of federal, state social services

By Kathy Hedberg of the Tribune

Sunday, February 6, 2011

Churches and other faith-based organizations often build their community outreach programs straight from the gospel:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink; a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me; ill and you cared for me; in prison and you visited me."

(Matthew 25: 35-36)

Local religious organizations provide everything from meals, housing, clothing, and utility assistance to personal counseling, job training, financial planning and educational assistance to people in need.

Yet, even though these organizations expect an increase of assistance requests - based on a rise of such pleas in the past few years - none of them say they can fully supplant the services state and federal government are now supplying through social service agencies.

Catholic Charities 'maxed out by requests'

In testimony provided to the Legislature's joint budget committee Jan. 28, Monsignor Andrew Schumacher said it's "unrealistic" to think developmentally disabled or mentally ill individuals can get by without government services.

"In my ministry to people with disabilities, I see families struggling to maintain a reasonable lifestyle," said Schumacher, a priest in the Diocese of Boise and chairman of the Catholic Charities of Idaho. "Most have children or adult children with autism. Home care seems the best option, (but) they demand 24-7 care. It is impossible for a family alone to meet all the needs, so they rely heavily on Medicaid services. To think they can receive sufficient support from their families, communities and nonprofit organizations is unrealistic. For example, Catholic Charities of Idaho is already maxed out by requests for help."

Peggy Jenkins of Moscow, president of the board of directors for the Unitarian Universalist Church, said her congregation donates food and money to local food banks and other nonprofit organizations in the area that serve poor and low-income families.

These donations usually amount to \$1,000 to \$2,300 per month.

"But if you're asking what more we could do, I can tell you we do not have the money to make any kind of dent in the problems that exist for poor and low-income people," Jenkins said. "We don't have the

membership and our members' pledges and contributions go primarily to operating expenses (for their own church).

"We'd like to work toward doing more but that's a drop in the bucket (compared to the need).

"Sorry governor."

The Salvation Army is often one of the first places people turn to when they're in need.

Capt. Ralph Guthrie, who heads the Lewiston Salvation Army post, said about 200 to 300 people are served weekly at the site, where meals, temporary shelter and other needs can be met. That number has been rising gradually over the past 18 months.

If state assistance went away, Guthrie would expect even more calls for the Salvation Army's help, particularly in paying for prescription drugs.

"I perceive helping more senior citizens with their medications," Guthrie said. That would involve a larger effort on the Salvation Army's part to seek donations from the community to keep its programs running.

"I would share with the community the need that arises because of all these (governmental) changes and let them know we're trying to help the people the best we can. And every little bit extra help would help."

People who seek assistance from the Salvation Army are not expected to adopt the church's creed or become a member. Guthrie said when people come to the site, the staff prays with them and they are encouraged to attend church services - either at the Salvation Army or at their own church.

"We offer our assistance for their spiritual life and then we let that be their decision," Guthrie said.

Mormon church prepares for increased need

The local stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also offers a wide variety of services, designed primarily to help families weather present storms and eventually become self-sufficient.

But people - including those who are not Mormons - are not required to accept the church's beliefs or become members to receive help, said stake President William Perez of Lewiston.

"Our church has a welfare system within the church. They use donations from members to help families that are in need. The biggest thing we work toward is ultimately we're looking at that family becoming self-reliant again. So the leaders, or bishops, of our congregations are in charge of helping families to do that," Perez said.

Assistance includes food and other basic household needs. But the church also provides educational assistance, counseling, travel assistance and other family services.

Perez said the church is braced for a possible increase in requests for help, both inside and outside the church, because of the lingering effects of the current recession.

"As I talk with our bishops, they have more requests, so we try to meet those needs locally if we can," Perez said. "Some of those congregations - or wards - are in more depressed areas, so maybe they can't meet their own needs, so we use funds from another unit. The recession has hit our members, too."

Vernon Herschberger, director of Family Promise, said the amount of assistance the inter-faith organization can provide to families depends mainly on grants and donations from private sources. And, given the current economic climate, it's not looking good for expanding services.

"We don't just provide financial assistance - we work with families to help get problems resolved," Herschberger said. "With the funding cuts by the government we'll need more resources ourselves to be able to help these folks. And, frankly, with the way the economy is, nonprofits are hurting. Everybody's pockets get hit harder. The contributions go down, as well. So it's kind of one of those cycles and the way I see it is there's more demand on us and with funding cuts we don't have that much more funding coming in. It just makes the challenge tougher because there's some real needs out there."

Herschberger said Family Promise is supported by 21 churches in the area and the organization provides housing for families in need, as well as transportation and help in locating and getting transportation to school and jobs. Family Promise is part of a national organization with 162 offices around the country. One of the biggest challenges at this time, he said, is to provide assistance to working parents or those looking for jobs who need help with day care. Herschberger said he fears cutbacks in government funding for those programs will only make the matter worse.

Churches also hit by tough economic times

The Orofino ministerial association has supported a community thrift store for several years. Clarence Howard, pastor of the First Christian Church in Orofino and chairman of the ministerial association, said the small organization is trying to meet the needs of the public as well as it can. But it's unlikely, Howard said, that the group would be able to absorb an increased demand if government social services are cut back.

"The churches are willing to do what they can," Howard said. "But the economic times have hit the churches as well. It's the same whether people go to church or don't go to church. The whole community is hit, so, yeah, there's some tough times."

The thrift store helps people with clothing, food and emergency needs, such as transportation, medical issues, housing, energy costs and eyeglasses, Howard said.

"We're trying to keep people from tottering over the edge with their life situations," he said. "In recent years we've been bending a lot more in help to people than we are able to raise from the revenue. In other words, we're going in the hole trying to help people. Right at the present time we're not in the red. But we anticipate that there could be some fluctuations (in the economy) and a time when things could get really nasty."

Mark Brewster, pastor of Orchards Community Church in Lewiston, said the challenges facing churches as they try to meet social and economic needs in their communities may force new thinking about how ministry is delivered.

"The American culture - it's shifted so much where the church culture and American culture were sort of compatible," Brewster said. "And now there's a lot of differences.

"It used to be that we could encourage people to hear our message. And yet now it's not quite as effective to do that. For a lot of people who have never been in a church it's a foreign culture.

"Jesus told us we're supposed to go out into the world rather than invite people into us. I'm starting to look at that and say, 'OK, what are we doing here?' We've got to rethink this because the needs are going to increase. They're not going to get easier; they're going to get harder."

Hedberg may be contacted at kathyhedberg@gmail.com or (208) 983-2326.