

## St. Vincent De Paul Continues to Serve During COVID-19

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SPECIAL TO THE CATHOLIC HERALD

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which has a mission to feed, clothe, house and restore individuals and families in need has had to respond with extraordinary responsiveness in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Without interruption, the charitable organization has adapted its services to federal and state guidelines, never closing the doors to those who rely on their critical services, according to Rebecca Surges, director of development and communications, and Debbie Duskey, executive director.

The organization, which has two stores in Milwaukee and conferences that operate out of 44 local parishes as well as one that operates out of the south side meal program, utilizes a service model that relies heavily on volunteer support and transitioned it to one that practices responsible social distancing and health safety. These actions were accomplished while continuing to provide for the most vulnerable in the Milwaukee community.

"We mostly do personal visits to people in need where two members go to someone's home, but now with the social distancing, we have had to change to telephone visits and if they assist with something like gift certificates or vouchers, those would be mailed," said Duskey. "Both stores were closed for a brief amount of time as well as both of our meal program sites, but all are open now. However, our meal programs are different now. We don't have dining rooms open and but provide hot box to-go meals, and our staff is making the meals rather than volunteers and making the meals in commercial kitchens only."

The south side meal program continues to serve the area's hungry six nights a week and five nights a week on the city's



▲ St. Vincent de Paul continued helping vulnerable populations throughout the coronavirus health emergency. (Submitted photo)

north side. Staff always wore gloves when handling food, but they are now following CDC social distancing guidelines as well as wearing masks.

"We are serving about 100 per location, which is a little less than usual, which we attribute to the stimulus checks, extra food share and the fear of going out," said Surges. "We anticipate those numbers to go way up as we move into the summer, however."

Duskey and Surges are not sure when the dining rooms will open again for sit-down service, as the challenge will be adhering to social distancing practices.

"We aren't sure if we will go to staggered serving or whether we can eventually return to the way it was," said Duskey. "For the foreseeable future, we will be serving the box meals. People really rely on us for these meals and we want to make sure we accommodate them."

Last year, the meal programs served 66,000 hot meals, with 11,000 of those to children. That percentage is going up,

said Surges. With schools being closed, she anticipates that number to climb exponentially.

"We get quite a few homeless and ordinarily we offer them a shower at our south location, Cross Roads Kitchen, but it is being remodeled right now," Surges said. "We call it the Healing Waters Shower Program. They can sign up and get toiletries, fresh clothing and sometimes sleeping bags, depending on donations."

In the United States for 150 years, St. Vincent de Paul's outreach efforts include home visits; rent assistance; housing supplies, such as furniture, appliances and beds, especially for children; the meal program; area food pantries; and the retail stores where 90 percent of proceeds go back to helping the poor.

Primary funding for the SVDP mission comes from parish collections and the retail store. With both entities closed during the COVID-19 outbreak, their funds have greatly decreased.

"We are getting a lot of donations, such as housewares and furnishings for our stores since people were home for so long and had time to clear out unneeded items, but monetarily, we are down," explained Duskey. "The stores have limited hours and we put safety plexiglass up at the registers, do extra cleaning and sanitizing, and all of our store personnel wear masks. We have masks available for customers, but if they don't wish to wear them, we don't refuse service."

Before the shutdown, there were about 60 calls a day to the call center, asking for help. The numbers dropped to 20 or 30 during the shutdown, but now they are on the rise again. If a SVDP conference is unable to help someone in need, they will refer people to 211, WI Rent Assistance Program or Community Advocates for help.

Most challenging during this time is the funding for SVDP's various programs, and meeting and anticipating the needs of families needing assistance.

"We received emergency grants for our meal program from some community foundations in Milwaukee who have stepped up to support us. We are shifting to our Neighbors Helping Neighbors programs for our neediest in the parish communities and we really need funding for that," said Surges. "We are also struggling with how to do person-to-person visits, help with appliances (and) furnishings and just figure out how to maintain the person-to-person encounter with this new normal."

### IF YOU WANT TO HELP:

If you know of someone in need:  
414-462-7837, ext. 110

If you want to help:  
[www.svdpmilw.org/home.aspx](http://www.svdpmilw.org/home.aspx)  
[council@svdpmilw.org](mailto:council@svdpmilw.org)