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HEALTH AND OUTREACH

Gathered goods aid the homeless

By Melinda Keenan / World-Herald staff writer Jul 30, 2017 Updated 23 hrs ago



Dave Harvey, founder of Least of My Brethren, loads up his truck with goods to set up an apartment.

MELINDA KEENAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

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Dave Harvey needs lots of bicycles. Adult bicycles only, in good shape.

And he needs a place to store them until his ministry can give them away to the homeless.

"A bike is the greatest liberator," said Harvey, founder of Least of My Brethren. Most of Omaha's estimated 1,500 homeless people live along the Missouri River and downtown. "If they don't have a bike, they all go to the same places asking for a job. You've got to get farther out than that."

Handing out bikes to homeless job seekers is just one way Harvey says his Gretna-based organization is "filling a gap" between homeless and social service agencies. His ministry works with Heartland Family Service, the Salvation Army and Community Alliance to supply goods and services those organizations can't provide.

"Dave is absolutely filling a gap," said Heartland Family Service Vice President Joanie Poore.

Homeless families don't have access to beds, couches and other items that are critically needed when setting up a new home, Poore said. Even if donations could be located, transportation and labor to get the items where they need to be is a barrier.

"Dave helps to remove both barriers," she said.

Harvey has three rental storage units and a garage filled with donated household goods which are carted off two to three times a week to furnish low-rent apartments. Sometimes he goes out and picks up donations first. Other items are picked up at Heartland Family Service's Sarpy Donation Center — a collection point for secondhand household goods.

Harvey is one member of a "small but mighty" volunteer workforce in Heartland Family Service's Homeless Services programs, Poore said. Other volunteers sort donations of dishes, towels, pillows, bedding and more at the Donation Center. Some help in the office with filing, cleaning and organizing.

Volunteers are essential to serving the homeless. According to the 2016 survey provided by the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless, 983 of Omaha's homeless reside in emergency shelters; 469 live in transitional housing programs; and 57 are on the streets.

Because homelessness has so many causes, there's no easy solution to the problem. Job loss, physical illness, divorce, domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, mental illness, substance abuse, and lack of education or employment training are all contributing factors, Poore said. Heartland Family Service offers education, counseling and service programs to address each of those causes, and has five housing programs to meet individual needs. Least of My Brethren works for the Rapid Rehousing program, which supplies short-term assistance ranging from a deposit on an apartment to 12 months of rent.

"Dave, and others like him, are an important piece in the puzzle," Poore said. "His efforts have a lasting impact and help families to stabilize more quickly."

Least of My Brethren works through St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Gretna, where parishioners collect furnishings, sponsor pancake feeds and pack "blessing bags" with toiletries, socks and other necessities. The ministry keeps growing, attracting help from other churches and the general public through word-of-mouth and a Facebook page, which has nearly 1,400 followers.

"A lot of people want to make a difference," Harvey said.

Harvey, who works full-time for IBM, and his wife, Cheryl, devote about 25 hours a week to Least of My Brethren.

"It seems to be our passion and our life these past few years," he said.

The couple began the organization four years ago following Harvey's chance meeting with a homeless woman. While volunteering with the Salvation Army's Winter Night Watch, a woman asked for a blanket. When he told her all the blankets were gone, she began to cry. Harvey learned she had lost her job and her home and was living along the riverbank. He drove to his house and pulled out all the blankets and sleeping bags he could find, turned around and drove down to the river where he was alone in pitch darkness. He admits it wasn't the safest thing he's ever done. But he found her and many others like her.

Today, that woman has a job, a home and a husband.

"She's doing phenomenally," said Harvey, who touches base with her about once a year.

She was able to rebuild her life after she got a bicycle and found a job at Westroads Mall.

She'd pedal her bike to Westroads, Harvey said, "all the way from First and Hickory."