

“Meals in Wheels” program caring for homeless in Phoenix

By Christie Cowles

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Local church challenges valley to join “Meals in Wheels” program to care for homeless in Phoenix

Phoenix, Ariz.—As temperatures rise and summer weather sets in, Phoenix-area residents may spend more time indoors and out of the heat. But for thousands of people in the Valley, that luxury is not an option.

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that there are more than 6,500 homeless people in Phoenix. So whether it’s a pleasant 75 degrees or a blistering 115 outside, many of these people are out in the elements every day, trying to get by on very limited resources.

With dehydration and hunger being a constant struggle in these conditions, a local church in the Valley saw a tangible way it could care for the homeless in Phoenix and got to work on trying to help.

New Valley Church, of Chandler, Ariz., started a program called “Meals in Wheels” with the goal of providing water, food and encouragement to the homeless in the Valley.

Each week people in the church bring in non-perishable goods for collection. The items are gathered and assembled into plastic, re-sealable bags. The bags include items such as crackers, trail mix bars, raisins, nuts, granola bars, lip balm and bottled water.

As people head out of church each week, they take a few bags with them, put them in their vehicles and distribute them to the homeless -- on the side of the road, at traffic lights, and wherever they run into people in need around town.

Jeff Krieger, Director of Media and Mercy for New Valley, said the program is an effort to show love and kindness to the poor by caring for their physical needs, especially in the heat of the Phoenix summer.

The “Meals in Wheels” program started when New Valley member Cindy Coughlon brought the idea to church staff. She and her husband Rob Coughlon and their three children already were doing a smaller version of the project on their own.



"My kids were young and always hungry," she said. "I don't like giving them fast food, so I always kept a bag of healthy, non-perishable snacks and water in the car. One day we passed a homeless man. As usual, my heart hurt for the man, but it has been a long-standing policy of mine to not give money."

She said she remembered that she had food and water within arm's reach in her car, so she gave that to the man instead.

"He was grateful, and I was at peace, like I had found a resolution between God's desire that I help the hurting, and my civic responsibility to not support a possible drug or alcohol addiction," she said.

Coughlon said this same scenario played out a few more times as her family drove around town, and each time the recipients always appeared grateful.

"I got the kids together one afternoon and put together one-gallon Ziploc bags filled with water, juice, dried fruit, nuts, etc., and started handing them out," said Coughlon. "We continued receiving grateful responses as we handed them out, so I asked if we could share the idea with the church."

New Valley is optimistic about the impact "Meals in Wheels" can have on homeless residents in the Phoenix area. The church is encouraging other local churches to join in its efforts.

"If we can't end homelessness this summer, at least we can show people they are loved," said Krieger.

The "Meals in Wheels" program was developed in line with New Valley's belief and emphasis on an inherited dignity of all people. The church's aim is to nurture people in its congregation and the community, help them to grow, and to be its neighbors' keeper, in a sense, by caring for those around it.

New Valley Pastor Scott Brown, his family and several of their friends moved to Arizona from Ohio in 2003 to start the church. The church began as a small Bible study in Brown's home, and has since grown to about 150 people.

New Valley, a member of the Presbyterian Church in America, meets at Valley Christian High School (6900 W. Galveston Rd., Chandler, Ariz.) at 10:30am on Sundays.

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