Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

The Rev. Ann Helmke, head of Faith-Based Initiative, said 2,000 people are on the city's action-alert system, but "there's no reason we can't be at 200,000."

Text 'compassion' to 55000 to get charitable alerts

By Elaine Ayala
STAFF WRITER

At the end of every year, San Antonians who live paycheck to paycheck, on the precarious edge of homelessness, can't make rent.

The Rev. Ann Helmke, a Lutheran minister and the city's faith-based liaison, hears it from agencies, pastors and volunteers. It has led her to push to get more San Antonians signed up for the city's action-alert system, which has become central to the Faith-Based Initiative's work.

Participants text the word "compassion" to 55000, then watch for monthly texts or urgent-action alerts that point to an immediate need – sometimes bottled water, nonperishable food or blankets. The system alerts volunteers "to urgent human needs or services that will benefit from a concerted and well-informed effort."

Helmke rejects the notion that poor people overextend themselves at Christmas and commit to obligations they can't meet. Dawn White-Fosdick, executive director of Christian Assistance Ministries, calls the end-of-year housing crisis a "funding cycle" that the poor and working poor find hard to shake.

During the first quarter of the new year, they recover. How? White-Fosdick has a theory: They're the first to apply for income-tax refunds and take side jobs, often related to annual events like Fiesta or the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo, which helps pay the rent.

"Then the summer comes around, and it gets a

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little worse because of high electricity bills," White-Fosdick said. "By fall, they're robbing Peter to pay Paul. Everything is in trouble. They're late on water and electricity bills, and their phone and car payments. They pay everything late, then everything is disconnected."

By year's end, they lose apartments, have to move and are the first, again, to file for tax returns in the new year, usually paying a chunk to tax preparation chains.

"Then the whole game starts over again," White-Fosdick said.

Local agencies that provide limited rental assistance run low at the end of year, too. Some help only with the second half of a rent payment after the client has paid the first – and has been served with an eviction notice.

SAMMinistries provides rental aid but details vary based on funds available, an official said. Eviction notices are required, and only 20 applications a week are taken.

White-Fosdick said waiting for eviction is risky and scary, and "then they have to spend all day calling to get an appointment."

Christian Assistance Ministries used to offer rental aid but funds were so limited it decided to focus on utility assistance, food and clothing, among other services.

Helmke thinks the text alert system can be deployed against the larger problem of affordable housing.

Alma E. Hernandez / Contributor

Christian Assistance Ministries used to offer rental aid, but funds were so limited it decided to focus on utility assistance, food and clothing, among other services.

Take the week an alert went out for diapers. Helmke can draw a straight line from the need for such disposables to the ability to pay rent.

"Some people can't go to work because they don't have diapers," Helmke said. "They can't take their kids to day care without diapers. They stay home with their children."

The alert system has a track record already. It garnered a big response from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during a cold snap, when a request went out for warm clothes and blankets.

Local church leaders asked the LDS humanitarian services office in Salt Lake City for help, which responded with a truckload of supplies that arrived in large, labeled, organized bundles.

The church asked Salt Lake City for aid to replenish shelves at the San Antonio Food Bank, resulting in 20,000 jars of peanut butter, 10,000 of which were set aside for Catholic Charities.

Spokeswoman Leisa Parsons said the LDS church also made a $76,000 donation toward a truck-trailer unit that will be outfitted with two mobile showers, two restrooms and laundry facilities for the homeless, expected to be delivered in December.

"It has been in response to what Ann has done," Parsons said.

In 2017, the system sent four action alerts starting in October. In 2018 so far, 12 action alerts have been sent, Helmke said. "To date, this text messaging has driven almost 10,000 views on actions steps."

About 2,000 people are signed up to receive text alerts, most of them from faith communities.

"Anybody can be on it," Helmke said. "There's no reason we can't be at 200,000."

Helmke said the alert system also has helped migrants and refugees after their release from immigration detention centers in South Texas.

Jan Olsen, a retired nurse with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition, used it to ask for over-the-counter medications.

"We got six months' worth of medicines and diapers," Olsen said. "It was an unbelievable response."

During the holidays, many charities focus on tangible gift-giving. "That's not bad," Helmke said.

Other needs are invisible, and if more San Antonians were connected to the immediacy of human needs, "it would change everything," she said.

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