

A Call for Community & Connection

The evolution of the St. Vincent de Paul Ministry

FOR decades The Basilica's St. Vincent de Paul Ministry has provided a valuable arc of programs designed to support those experiencing homelessness. Much of the ministry's success has come from the generosity of parishioners' donations and volunteering.

The Basilica plays a significant role in the community; therefore how it chooses to respond to homelessness is critical, and there has been a concerted effort to evaluate the programs' impact as community needs change. This exercise began before the pandemic started as part of the latest strategic plan with a lens focused on homelessness and continues today.

In response to the strategic plan's invitation to prioritize supporting those experiencing homelessness, The Basilica asked key questions, worked with community partners, and challenged its own paradigms. This reflection led to reimagined programs: sustainable and intentional ministries that meet both the needs of those in the community as well as volunteers who want to engage; ministries designed to empower people to make life changes and that truly make a difference to end homelessness. This meant ending some long-supported programs, modifying others, and embarking on a few new ones.

When all existing St. Vincent de Paul programs paused at the start of the pandemic, it was an opportunity to reach out to those with lived experiences of homelessness about the greatest needs in that community. The answer was a resounding one: people are looking for connection and relationship with others. The Basilica then

BY ELYSE RETHLAKE



(Left) The Basilica's St. Vincent de Paul Ministry set up for social distancing 2022.
(Below) Volunteers prepare sandwiches each week.

embarked on a path to provide an opportunity for those with lived experiences of homelessness and other community members and parishioners to come together; a ministry that could help build relationships across the differences that benefits all and changes ministry from transactional to transformational. Several new Saturday ministries under the St. Vincent de Paul umbrella have come from this including the Platter of Wellness Series and Ministry Packing Events.

The Platter of Wellness Series began in February and focuses on holistic wellness. Sessions include topics like journaling, art, meditation, body movement, and nutrition and were led by experts from the community. It was so well received by everyone—from parishioners to those currently living in shelters to those with past experiences of homelessness—that the series will be expanded in the coming months for longer sessions on existing topics as well as the addition of new topics. More than just a



resource for incorporating wellness practices into everyday life, the format of the ministry itself provides the backdrop for conversation and connection among participants.

The Ministry Packing Events are easy Saturday volunteer opportunities to work side by side with fellow parishioners and community members to create tangible results like winter clothing packs for

homeless shelters, art and journaling kits for youth in family shelters, and cleaning supply kits for family shelters. Many times, those who will be receiving the materials are part of the packing process—which promotes community building while providing essential items to those in need. This ministry was purposefully designed to be a simple but impactful experience accessible to all.

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Programs that have changed include the Shoe Ministry and Families Moving Forward. While shoe vouchers are no longer part of the Saturday morning offering as they have been for many years, The Basilica will be supporting Good in the 'Hood Shoe Away Hunger Program to provide affordable work footwear to those in need. The Basilica will also no longer house families on its campus as part of the Families Moving Forward program. Most family shelters had already moved out of Hennepin County and into surrounding counties before the start of the pandemic. During the pandemic, those shelters moved families into hotels, and The Basilica supported them throughout with meals. While there will not be families living directly on The Basilica campus in the future, The Basilica will support its neighboring church, Plymouth Congregational, as they

transition several families from hotels into their campus. Changes to the Shoe Ministry and Families Moving Forward stem from the shifting needs within the community as well as opportunities for The Basilica to partner with other resources already providing specific support so that The Basilica can focus on other unique programs within its own ministry.

When asked to share her outlook on the St. Vincent de Paul Ministry, Janice Andersen — The Basilica Director of Christian Life — expressed, “I’m humbled at the response

and incredibly hopeful and excited. I see the energy and commitment of parishioners; I see the neighborhood engaging with us. We’ll continue to learn from the community. Mutuality and solidarity are at the heart of the ministries.”



PHOTOS/MAE DESAIRE



As the programs continue to evolve, The Basilica is rooted not only in listening to the community, but also in listening to what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do with, through and alongside our neighbors. All are encouraged to participate in this dialogue. Please contact Janice Andersen at jandersen@mary.org to learn more, share in the planning process, or provide resources. ✝

Elyse Rethlake is a parishioner and a volunteer BASILICA photographer.