

REACHING OUT

Interchurch helps residents with food, clothing, utilities

By Geoff Cowles

Interchurch Social Services of Knox County has been helping people in their time of need for over half a century. For Mount Vernon's Carolyn Fergus, Interchurch director since last year, meeting that need is her retirement occupation. Fergus has been helping people in crisis for her entire working life.

"I was a 911 dispatch operator for 35 years," said Fergus. "So, I worked on the other end of the emergencies. Now, I get to work with them in person."

Fergus is, perhaps, the busiest person in Knox County. She and a small army of volunteers, donors, businesses and partnerships are united in the fight against hunger and homelessness. Acquiring and maintaining the resources to stay prepared is a constant job. Last Thursday, for example, Fergus had to oversee a shipment of 13,000 pounds of food, being received into the Interchurch pantry in Mount Vernon.

"We get it from Mid-Ohio Food Bank," said Fergus. "That's who we order from. We get deliveries twice a month and (Thursday) was one of our delivery days."

Interchurch also must supply their three other locations in Knox County and each has a food pantry to keep stocked. Aside from the main branch in Mount Vernon, there are also locations in Danville, Fredericktown and Centerburg.

"Our branch locations all do the same things," Fergus said. "We have thrift stores, which help raise money for the pantries (along with grant money and donations)."



Aside from food assistance, Interchurch serves the community in a variety of ways. For people facing personal, financial hard times – short or long term – Interchurch provides a vital link to stove off eviction or utility cut off.

"We provide emergency financial assistance," Fergus said. "This is for people, who get behind on their bills. They might be facing eviction or lose their housing. We can do mortgage or rental assis-

tance. We can help if electric, gas or water is going to be shut off. We can pay something toward it to keep the utilities on."

The United Way also provides grant money to help Interchurch to provide the financial assistance that people need to get by in a crisis.

"We provide emergency prescription money," said Fergus. "That way, if you can't afford your medicines, we can assist with the cost of prescriptions. We also provide gasoline vouchers. So, if you have an out of county medical appointment and don't have the gas money to get there, we can help with gas vouchers."

Interchurch also does clothing vouchers. Once a month, clients can get an outfit from the thrift store at no cost.

Interchurch has come a long way since getting its start in 1968. Back then, a quartet of local Mount Vernon churches participated, and they had a total of \$1,500 to work with.

"We, now, partner with as many churches as are willing, in Knox County," said Fergus. "They partner with us and support us, so we are locally funded by church support, individuals, groups and organizations."

A key partnership is with Food For the Hungry of Knox County. Last year alone, FFTH collected over a quarter million dollars to fight hunger, county-wide. Interchurch receives 38 percent of that total to help keep their pantries stocked.

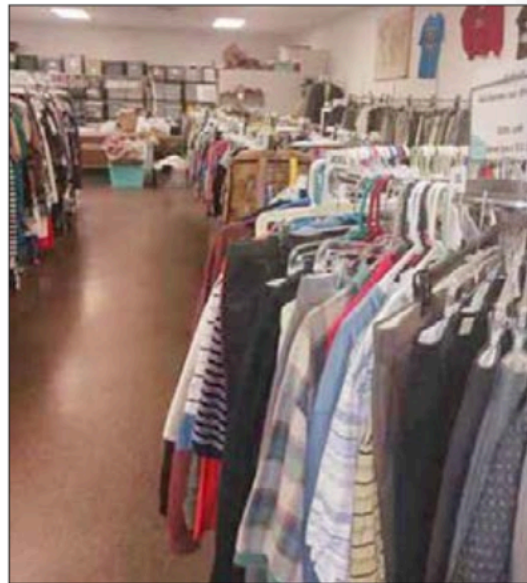
"There's nothing like it," said Fergus. "It's just amazing. Food For the Hungry really helps our food pantry."

To be eligible for help from Interchurch, applicants must be at 200 percent or below the federal poverty guideline.

"That requirement is standard across Mid-Ohio Food bank and Ohio Jobs and Family Services. That's generally the threshold for most services," said Fergus. "Obviously, we are limited on how often you can use our financial assistance, or how much."

Interchurch partners with Ohio Jobs and Family Services every September to do back to school vouchers.

"(ODJFS) has the grant money through PRC (Prevention, Retention, Contingency) and, with their help, Interchurch was able to provide \$125 vouchers to 1,400 local Knox County students, to get their back to school gear, like clothes, shoes, back packs and school supplies," said Fergus. "We ran out at 1,400 and that was in three days."



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The racks at the Interchurch Social Services Thrift Store are full of gently used clothing.

Each student gets their voucher, but it doesn't end there.

"Local businesses partner with us, to accept the vouchers," said Fergus. "Then it's all reimbursed through (ODJFS). It's a huge project."

In the last six months, the number of families, going to interchurch for food assistance has doubled from a little over 200

which is over 1,100 individuals receiving food."

With winter approaching, the month of October is time for the annual Coats for Kids drive. The Kiwanis and Knox County Foundation receive donations of new or gently used coats to help needy children. Donors leave the coats at advertised drop off points. Once they are collected, Interchurch gets involved.

"The used ones are taken to Gault's Cleaners on Coschocton Ave," explained Fergus. "They clean them all for free. Then, (Interchurch) picks them up and distributes them to those who need them."

For Fergus, the real payoff comes in the form of gratitude.

"Some of my best volunteers have used the food pantry," said Fergus. "They want to give back. They don't want stuff for free and we'll gladly accept them. It's their way of giving back. We've gotten thank you notes, hugs, and just tears. People just show their appreciation. It's amazing. This job gets busier, but I am blessed and loving every minute of it. It is such a blessing to see the people in need and know that they are being taken care of."

For more information on receiving help, or if you wish to volunteer, call Interchurch in Mount Vernon at (740) 397-4825, or in Danville at (740) 599-5673.

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families in February. Fergus attributes this increase in need to government cuts to food stamps, along with the rise in the cost of food and other essentials.

"We're one of the few pantries that is open five days a week at our choice pantry, where you get to come in and do your shopping like a grocery store," Fergus said. "We broke the 400 threshold in August. We had 405 families,



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Residents can find all types of food and household items at Interchurch Social Services.