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Costly gas doesn't stop volunteers

Assistance important to nonprofits helping more needy families with limited resources.

LINDA LEICHT • NEWS-LEADER • MAY 4, 2008

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Gasoline at more than \$3 a gallon means Dwayne Rogers will not be able to attend a family funeral in Iowa, but it won't stop him from volunteering every Wednesday at the South Side Senior Center.



Area nonprofit agencies are counting on volunteers and donors to continue their support amid soaring prices, while those same price hikes are straining agencies and their supporters alike.

Rogers answers phones and does small fix-up jobs at the center, where lunch is prepared for people to eat with friends and delivered to the homebound.

"I'm on empty," Rogers said between phone calls. "It'll cost me probably \$80 to fill up."

Like several people at the center, he and his wife skip meals at home to be able to buy gas so he can continue to donate his time.

"I love helping them out," he said.

Norman and Bettie Wise drive to Grand Oaks Baptist Mission every Wednesday to sort and

stack groceries on the shelves of the mission's food pantry.

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With gas over \$3 a gallon, the retired couple have changed their driving habits, combining errands whenever possible.

So far, it hasn't stopped them from driving across town to the mission, a trip they have taken for the past four years.

"We feel like there's a real need," said Bettie Wise.

But they do have a breaking point.

"When it gets to be \$4 a gallon, I ain't coming," Norman Wise said with a grimace.

In the meantime, the Wises worry about dwindling food supplies for the pantry.

"We're kind of low right now," said Bettie Wise.

At Crosslines, an operating agency of the Council of Churches that provides a range of emergency assistance to the poor, the rising numbers of people coming in for help has strained the pantry shelves.

Area houses of worship -- called fish churches -- commit to providing food for the pantry each month from members' donations.

"We were asking churches to provide for food for 35 families a day," said Pam Copling, Crosslines director.

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"Now we are asking them to feed 45 to 50 families."

Last year, the agency saw about 150 new families a month. Halfway through April, 106 new families had already come in the door.

As summer approaches, Copling knows that those numbers will increase, as giving typically goes down.

Redeemer Lutheran Church is working hard to meet that rising need.

"The people just continue to give," said Billie Brown, coordinator of Redeemer's Crosslines effort for the past 10 years. Redeemer has been a fish church for more than 36 years.

"God has really blessed our church," said Brown. "God works through people and people's hearts. He is blessing our church through volunteers and people giving to Crosslines."

Brown has had to shop harder to look for the best deals on food, using her own car and gasoline. Instead of cutting back, she just tries to shop and travel smarter.

"I try to coordinate things, do several things at one time," she said. "Everyone is doing that."

The inconvenience and extra cost will not stop Brown or her church from continuing their ministry.

"When God calls you to do a service with him, he wants you to take care of that," she said.

Mark and Dorothy Harsen share that attitude.

They have been regular donors to Rainbow Network for several years. They make regular donations to the Springfield-based humanitarian agency that serves the poor in rural Nicaragua.

"I don't view charitable giving as discretionary spending," said Dorothy Harsen. "It is part of why I get up and go to work every day.

"I want to feel like I am making a difference in the world."

The rising cost of living doesn't stop the Harsens from giving. Instead, it points to their own plenty in light of the needs of others, she said.

"I'm more likely to clip coupons and skip McDonald's coffee than to cut back on giving to someone worse off than I am."

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