

A Big Assist in Fighting Homelessness

Rent assistance initiatives help parishioners and others in our community

BY RICK MOORE

“So, we come here and we’re face to face with the inequity and the brokenness of society, and also the incredible grandeur of God’s love.”

Those words from Janice Andersen, The Basilica’s Director of Christian Life, describe so much of what we are faced and blessed with in today’s world; however, in this case, they apply specifically to The Basilica’s long-term and ongoing contributions toward fighting the scourge of homelessness.

As affordable housing stock shrinks, rents rise, and inflation strains the budgets of many, homelessness rates continue to spike. But The Basilica has been stepping up, through its St. Vincent de Paul Ministry and the generosity of donors, with a range of rent assistance initiatives to help alleviate the strain.

Aligning across congregations

For about 15 years The Basilica has been a part of Align Minneapolis (formerly known as Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness), an interfaith collaboration of 18 Minneapolis churches, synagogues, and mosques dedicated to addressing homelessness and poverty.

A while back, during a program session at a member mosque, a county commissioner told those assembled that “The biggest thing we could do to help end



Affordable rental housing in Minneapolis is in short supply.

homelessness is to prevent people from falling into homelessness.”

A week later, a Basilica parishioner who was at the event asked Andersen what she could do to help, saying she had \$50,000 that she wanted to give to The Basilica. With that blessing of a gift, Andersen collaborated with Align Minneapolis to create a collective program to help address homelessness, and the Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) program was born.

The ERA program is narrowly defined. It’s for people who have the means to keep their housing but have experienced a crisis that threatens their immediate financial situation. On Mondays, volunteers listen to the circumstances and needs of the people seeking help. The requests then go to a group that meets on Thursdays to screen the applications that have come through

The Basilica and three other congregations.

“The crisis has to be verified, and if it’s verified and they owe less than \$2,000 or three months’ rent, we can help them if we haven’t hit our cap of money that we have that week,” Andersen says. “So, it’s a very limited program.”

Andersen notes that Align Minneapolis exists because of donations large and small from the various congregations, including through The Basilica’s St. Vincent de Paul Ministry. “We give some money for the general operating expenses for Align and some money for the ERA program. Other congregations do the same.”

“The most important part is that it’s an interfaith collaborative,” Andersen adds. “But that is such a small piece of what we do in rent assistance.”

Toward ‘rare, brief, and non-recurring’

Regarding the prevalence of homelessness in our community, Andersen embraces the mantra: “We want to make homelessness rare, we want to make it brief, and we want to make it non-recurring.”

“If you can prevent more people from becoming homeless, that’s important,” she adds. “Then once they are homeless, how do you get them out of it? And then, once they are out of it, how do you help them stay out of it?”

For starters, there is ongoing grassroots advocacy for policy changes and for funding mechanisms to build more housing. There’s clearly not enough affordable housing—in the Twin Cities as well as in so many places in our state and country. In the Twin Cities, part of the problem is that we’re losing “Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing” (known as NOAH) to redevelopment faster than we’re building new affordable housing, so the pool of affordable housing is actually shrinking.

Rectifying that will take time, and in the meantime The Basilica has upped the financial assistance that flows through the St. Vincent de Paul Ministry and directly to those in need.

Much of the housing assistance support is geared toward helping people keep the housing that they have, Andersen says. “Over the years there’s been a commitment to do that. And we’ve had different amounts of funding that we can do it with and different populations we identify to funnel that.”

One such group is members of our Basilica congregation. “We help quite a number of parishioners. Some of them are new to the community and to The Basilica, and some of them have never needed assistance before and now they’re facing some challenges,” Andersen says. “We have engaged and involved parishioners here who, because of no fault of their own, have lost their employment. So we’ve been able to help parishioners with short-term rent assistance.”

Staff meets with those in need and informs them of other Basilica program offerings including job coaches, prayers shawls, and Emmaus listening ministers.

The support may just be for a month, but sometimes it can last longer. “We make a plan together to support the family through the crisis,” Andersen says. “And then as time goes, we reevaluate. It’s not endless. We seek to be respectful, sensitive, and good stewards of the funds.”

The St. Vincent de Paul Ministries also assist other groups that have a relationship with The Basilica. Among those are students at Minneapolis College involved with The Basilica’s decade-old Hennepin Connections mentoring program. Many of these students have had lived experience of homelessness or generational poverty, and while they may be housed right now, “we’re trying to ensure that they don’t fall back into that homelessness,” Andersen says.

Xaviea Edison joined the Hennepin Connections program six years ago while a nursing student at Minneapolis College (formerly Minneapolis Community and Technical College) across Hennepin Avenue from The Basilica. She earned her associates degree in nursing in May 2023, gained her licensure as an RN that summer, and is currently in rehabilitation nursing helping patients with acute illnesses at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in South Minneapolis.



Neighbors in need frequently sleep outside at The Basilica campus.



Xaviea Edison, a student in the Hennepin Connections mentoring program.

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— Janice Andersen

While at Minneapolis College, Edison often struggled with finances while taking classes and also helping both her brother and her grandmother. “Being a part of Hennepin Connections has been a blessing to me, because sometimes they were the only resource that I had for things like rent help,” she says. “It kept me from homelessness, honestly, because I didn’t really have a lot of options or places to go.”

Another Hennepin Connections student, who asked not to be named, shares a similar story. Last fall, after her mom was laid off from her job, she and her family fell short on the income needed to pay rent and utilities. “I was kind of in a desperate situation at the time,” she says. “If (The Basilica) didn’t support us the way they did, we would not be currently having a home to go back to right now.”

Assistance is also given through The Basilica Re-entry Mentor Program benefiting people who have recently been released from prison. In a partnership with the Department of Corrections and Volunteers of America, two mentors are paired with one “re-entering” neighbor. (You can read more about this program in this issue.)

Finally, there is The Basilica’s Immigrant Support Ministry, which has two components: one supports refugees through Lutheran Social Service. As refugees, families arrive with legal status. The Basilica provides funding for housing for six months and accompanies them for their first year through Circle of Welcome Teams. The second supports people seeking asylum. Teams work in partnership with Advocates for Human Rights, accompanying them for a year, providing housing support and other basic needs.

A chance to reflect the grandeur of God’s love

After outlining the myriad ways that The Basilica helps those struggling with housing, Andersen takes a breath and reflects on the importance of the work, not to mention the generosity of parishioners and donors.

“The Basilica sits amidst homeless encampments,” she says. “When I started working here, there was a three-generation family living right underneath the freeway right there (a stone’s throw from The Basilica). They used to ring the door bell [for services], and you’d smell the gasoline on them because it was dripping down from the highway.”

She displays some recent images, like the ones we’ve all seen with our own eyes, of makeshift tents and a man living in a “moat” at the bottom of a staircase next to a door of The Basilica. Anyone who spends time downtown or near the encampments in the Cedar-Riverside or East Phillips neighborhoods of Minneapolis knows the scene well.

“We are a parish of diversity. We have some of the wealthiest families here and we have people living in our moats,” she says. “And the gift is that this is not theoretical. This is a place where you can be in relationship with the most vulnerable. Gaps are bridged. That’s what I love about our Hennepin Connections program is that it bridges those gaps between races, between cultures, between housed and unhoused, between so many things.”

Over the last three years, The Basilica has provided over 600 individual assists to people, and of those, 175 were assists to parishioners.

The rent assistance helped Edison at a critical point in her journey. She’s now a nurse, supporting herself, and thriving. Last fall, she enrolled at Metro State University and is on track to earn a bachelor’s degree in the spring of 2026.



Janice Andersen, The Basilica’s Director of Christian Life.

And that would have been even harder, Andersen notes, had we not provided that “foundational help” to prevent her from sliding into homelessness.

Adds Andersen: “What more powerful way to worship than amidst all of that?! Where God is present. We may not have chosen [The Basilica] for that reason, but that is where we are. It gives us a chance to figure out, ‘How do we respond?’” ✚

Rick Moore has been an active volunteer and parish member for about 20 years. He’s also been a mentor for Hennepin Connections since its inception.