

HCC Warehouse Provides \$650,000 In-Kind Donations to Area's Underserved

HCC Asking for Bed and Blanket Donations



The heart to serve and a will to make a difference can ignite a ripple effect that impacts the lives of many. This is what's happening in Lexington and surrounding communities. It all started in 2014. Bob Vickers, now the network coordinator at Health Care Collaborative (HCC) of Rural Missouri, happened to meet a few HCC employees at a Johnson County Homeless Project Connect event in West Central Missouri. After that initial connection, HCC started attending Johnson County's Project Connect planning meetings and in early 2015 toured a warehouse that Vickers managed in Warrensburg, Mo.

The ripple effect

"Amanda and I just looked at each other and said, 'We want one of these,'" said Suzanne Smith, HCC's director of network development. (Amanda Arnold serves as HCC's director of nursing). Smith and Arnold took the idea back to HCC's CEO Toniann Richard and Vice President of Operations Cathy Wallace. They toured the warehouse facility in Warrensburg and understood the impact one would have in Lafayette County.

Suffice it to say, Vickers helped instigate the ripple effect. His heart to serve spans 35 years and today he brings his passion to HCC. His network of contacts throughout the country has also played a significant role in helping this community meet the needs of the underserved. "He has taught me to never say 'no' to a donation and by doing so, we have already established many new donor relationships in our area," Smith said.

Now, Lexington has its own warehouse in a 7,500 square-foot building in a strip center right off of Highway 13 adjacent to the Lexington 4-Life Center. The cement floor warehouse was at one time, in its prime, a video store. It has 15-foot ceilings, supporting poles and a loading dock. There is a double-door front door with four steps to the door platform on one end and an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant ramp at the other end of the approach. The back door has a 6-foot by 12-foot concrete landing and loading dock leading into the rear double-door entrance for unloading pallets.

Smith said the facility remained vacant for the past seven years before they approached the property owner about leasing the building. "We promised to show a significant return of in-kind products that we could put in the hands of people – throughout the county and surrounding areas – that needed them most," Smith said. HCC's partnership with area social service agencies is just one tool it uses to tap into the material needs of the underserved. The rest, as they say, is history.

Meeting the need

"Since June 2016, we have been able to meet the needs of families and individuals who are in need, by gathering and distributing more than \$650,000 worth of in-kind donations," Smith said. "This includes furniture, laundry detergent, toothpaste, tooth brushes, shampoo, and other household and personal items and many other products. The need is huge in this area."

Smith emphasized that 67 percent of the food found in landfills in the United States is edible. Additionally, she said that 62 percent of all non-food and non-trash items found in landfills are still usable. "We try to intervene with a variety of sources before items are discarded into landfills. These things can be recirculated back into the community where unmet needs continue to rise. This is a vital part of HCC Network's continuum of care model. We holistically look at a person's needs – physical, emotional, socioeconomic – and try to fill in the gaps."

Retail rejections and merchandise with slight defects are among the resources that HCC leverages to fill these gaps and glean in-kind donations for the warehouse. This includes merchandise from various manufacturing companies (laundry detergent, paper goods, candle makers, etc.) to consignment stores, soda distributors, shoe stores, pastry shops, Starbucks, Pizza Hut, buffets, convenience stores, caterers and food supplies, dog food companies, lumber yards, insurance companies, colleges and universities, hotels, and much more.

"There are always rejects, seconds, overruns, last year's models, discontinued products, returns and products that don't meet quality control for some reason," Smith said. "We can never guarantee what we have in the warehouse but if there is a need for something that we don't have, many times we can leverage items that we do have to find what we need."

As for how to tap into this resource, any agency that is a member of the HCC Network has access to the warehouse and there are no eligibility requirements for those who may be in need of warehouse items. HCC works through its agency-member network which has direct access to individuals and families with unmet needs. Through the nonprofit's Connector program, people who receive warehouse goods also have an opportunity to receive additional support for any other unmet needs.

A call for donations and volunteers

"Although we are extremely proud of the work that has been done in the short amount of time that we've had the warehouse, the need is so great," Smith said. "We are also so blessed to be a part of a community where there are many people willing to help."

HCC is asking Lafayette County and surrounding communities for help. "Right now we have 13 organizations on a waiting list for beds for about 20 people. We have given out more than 45 beds in the past 60 days. In addition, we have distributed more than 300 new and gently used blankets in the past 30 days including Project Connect in Higginsville and could use at least 300 more. As soon as we have a bed or blanket donated, it is already spoken for and is back out the door to the organization that requested it for their client in need. We have worked with many of our school districts to find beds that a family needs in order to reunite children with their parents," she said. Requests for formula and diapers is also another huge need they try to fill.

In addition, HCC is looking for a business that has a box truck in good condition that they would like to donate in exchange for a tax deduction. "That is one of the largest barriers that we have at this time," she said.

When it comes to unmet needs, cash is still king. Smith said they can typically take a dollar donation and scale it to \$25 to \$30 worth of products. They also use cash donations to purchase paper products such as toilet paper and paper towels from Harvesters to donate at Project Connect events and through the "care packages" they put together for those in need.

Last but not least, volunteers are needed to help sort products and materials as well as organize the warehouse. For more information, to donate or find out how to volunteer, contact Suzanne Smith or Bob Vickers at 660.259.2440. To learn more about HCC and its Live Well Community Health Centers in Buckner, Carrollton, Concordia and Waverly, visit HCCNetwork.org.

TheBucknerClarion.com

