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GOOD WORKS

St. Vincent helps keep lights on

Grant from national organization aids nonprofit

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When there is not enough money to pay the electric bill or rent, families can turn to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of East Jefferson County for help.

Each week, the faith-based nonprofit organization helps between 20 and 30 individuals and families keep their lights on and avoid eviction.

"Last year, we had a budget of around \$114,000, and we helped over 2,000 families," said John Cantlon, president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul East Jefferson County. "We help a friend in need get over a bump in the road. We are not big enough to get people down the bumpy road (all the way), but we can be a Band-Aid, and we can help them through a tough time."

About two-thirds of the nonprofit's annual budget is provided by the congregation of St. Mary, Star of the Sea, Catholic Church of Port Townsend. The rest is comprised mostly of grant money from a variety of sources, Cantlon said.

A recent grant of \$5,000 from the National Council of the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul will help the nonprofit continue to provide rent and utility assistance to underprivileged families and individuals.

"We just found out about that grant, so we applied for it," Cantlon said. "It is for emergency expenses – housing and utilities."

The grant was one of 27 distributed through the program nationally. Grant applications are evaluated and awarded quarterly on a regional basis by a Vincentian review committee. Funding is provided by the general public and members of the society, and it's targeted to specific needs in each community.

"We are pleased to be able to assist local conferences as they work to help those in need," said Dave Barringer, the CEO of the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul. "Our local conferences are a great example of how a dedicated group of people can make a difference in alleviating suffering."

The grant money is part of the nonprofit's Friends of the Poor Grant Program and will be disbursed by the St. Mary Star of the Sea Conference, headquartered at 1335 Blaine St., in Port Townsend.

Each week, the nonprofit sets aside a set amount of funding for distribution to those in need.

"The way we deal with grant money, when we get it, is to divide it up by a number of weeks so that we don't spend it all in one week," Cantlon said. "We can make the flow a little consistent for a little bit longer. The way our funding is going now, by Wednesday, we have pretty much used all the money we have to spend for that week."

If a special need arises, "we have other people in the faith community to help us put together a larger package for emergencies," Cantlon said.

Reaching out for help

When a family or individual is in need, the first step is to contact the nonprofit at 360-379-1325 to begin the process of receiving aid.

Basically, the way we structure what we do is we give out as much as \$200 for an individual every six months, as much as \$300 for a family every six months, or as much as \$400 for a family of five or more every six months."

The cap in the award is to ensure there is enough funding to help others in need.

"We have more applicants than we have funds," said Laurie Meyer, a member of the St. Mary Star of the Sea Conference. "The grant will be used to provide additional funding for temporary and emergency assistance for basic human needs in our community – specifically housing and utilities. The grant will provide funding to assist at least 29 more individuals and families during the upcoming months to avoid shut-off."

The money provided through the nonprofit is supplemental to other aid programs operated by Jefferson PUD and OlyCAP.

PUD has several payment-assistance programs, including low-income customer credit, which gives qualifying customers a \$39.50 credit on their electric bills each month; the low-income senior credit, which provides a \$20 credit on monthly bills for the elderly; and the Rainy Day Fund – a partnership between PUD and St. Vincent de Paul – which can assist those who receive a shutoff notice with up to \$500.

OlyCAP runs the the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which is funded through the Department of Commerce. LIHEAP assists families with energy costs.

The Rainy Day Fund (<https://youtu.be/6uMTACaUMjY>) distributed almost \$30,000 in aid in 2017, the PUD website states.

"As you know, the PUD allows people to round up or just pay more every month," Cantlon said. "Then they put that into their (Rainy Day Fund) program. At the end of every month, they take the money that they get, and they divide it in half and give half to us and half to OlyCAP. That money is dedicated for use to help people with utilities."

Serving their spiritual brothers and sisters

"We believe we are called to help our brothers and our sisters, and that it is really our responsibility to help everyone who needs help," Cantlon said. "Most of the people in the faith-based community all read the same book, and in that book, Jesus Christ, over and over and over again, tells us it is our responsibility to help people in need. And so, we try to live up to that just like every other faith-based group in Jefferson County."

The St. Mary Star of the Sea Conference was established in 1996 and is part of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's Archdiocesan Council of Seattle. One of the largest charitable organizations in the world, it is an international, nonprofit, Catholic lay organization of about 300,000.

Nationally, the society offers a variety of programs and services, including home visits, housing assistance, disaster relief, education and mentoring, food pantries, dining halls, clothing, assistance with transportation, prescription medication, and rent and utility costs.

The society also works to provide care for the sick, the incarcerated and the elderly. During the past year, the organization provided more than \$3.4 billion in tangible and in-kind services to those in need, made more than 2.1 million service visits and contacts, and helped more than 5.4 million people.

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