

Half-century of service: Franciscan Center offers dignity, respect and a listening ear

Fifty years ago, the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore were living in a convent on Maryland Avenue. They ministered around the corner, at the St. Francis School for Special Education, in a building that had previously been the St. Francis Home for African-American orphans.

Sensing the community's need as the 1960s neared a tumultuous close, the religious women began to minister to those on the street, making and distributing peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. The ministry was formalized Sept. 10, 1968, as the Franciscan Center of Baltimore, and in the 1990s set up shop in the building that had held the orphanage and school.

"We have quietly been a center of hope since day one," said Jeff Griffin, executive director, of its burgeoning role in its second half-century of service. "We're finding new ways to help our communities and our neighbors get back on their feet."

The Franciscan Center's most robust outreach is a meal program. In fiscal year 2018, nearly 300,000 meals were distributed through the hot, healthy lunch and dinner programs, and emergency grocery bags. Lunches are offered on weekdays, and dinners on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Guests are interviewed by a social worker who will assess the person's needs and guide them to its many resources at the Franciscan Center, which staff refer to as a "one-stop shop."

Resources include Attire-4-Hire (men's professional clothing); a barber; a children's library; clothing and toiletries; computer, job-readiness and GED classes; counseling services; eviction prevention; health care screenings and tests; mail reception; assistance in obtaining IDs and birth certificates; prescription referrals; transportation tokens and phone access for employment, health or housing

opportunities; and utility assistance.

“We are digging in deep on how we can help people before they have to get to us,” Griffin said. “We listen to our social workers and our volunteers, and there are a couple needs that jump out.”

Among them, Griffin said, are helping those in search of safe, reliable and affordable housing; expanding the dinner program to more than two nights a week; and direct-learning initiatives.

The Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore merged with the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, based in Milwaukee, Wis., in 2001. When Sister Mary Jeanne Quinlivan, of the latter order, heard about the Baltimore sisters’ ministries, she was most impressed with the Franciscan Center.

“My heart just kind of skipped a beat,” Sister Mary Jeanne said, sensing it was where God wanted her to be. “It stirred something in me.”

She finally moved nine years ago to Baltimore, where she ministers at the Franciscan Center as a social worker.

“It’s a ministry, it’s not just a job,” Sister Mary Jeanne said. “Ministry is such a mutual thing. I get as much out of it as I will ever give to someone else.”

One of her clients, Tyra Owens, has used the services of the Franciscan Center for more than 15 years. Following a separation from her husband, the center has provided her a mailbox and an ID, in addition to food and clothing.

“It’s a blessing,” Owens said, adding that the most valuable resource at the Franciscan Center is Sister Mary Jeanne, who attended her grandson’s funeral. “She’s just a sweet, caring person.”

Many times, Sister Mary Jeanne said, providing a “listening ear” is just as important as informing clients of resources.

“It’s important what we do, but it’s more important how we do what we do,” Sister Mary Jeanne said. “People can come here and always be treated with dignity and

respect.”

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