

Mobile Response Center vehicle will make reaching the needy easier for local Catholic Charities

ALEXANDRIA, Va. - Thanks to a partnership with Catholic Charities USA and Ford Motor Company, Catholic Charities in Baltimore, Arlington and Washington and will be able to provide curbside assistance to area homeless and poverty-stricken communities for one week each month.

Representatives from Ford Motor Company presented Catholic Charities USA with a Mobile Response Center vehicle at a press conference in Alexandria Aug. 22.

"We are grateful to Ford for their support of our mission to provide service to individuals and families in need," said Dominican Sister Donna Markham, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA. "The Mobile Response Center vehicle will allow Catholic Charities to reach people who need basic necessities during times of disasters, as well as people in the D.C., Baltimore and Northern Virginia regions who struggle with homelessness every day."

The vehicle, a 26-foot retrofitted Ford F550 cab and chassis outfitted by Dejana Truck and Utility in Baltimore, will deliver supplies, such as water, hygiene products, grocery gift cards and snack packages directly to the needy. During the winter, coats and blankets will be distributed.

Inside, the vehicle has shelves to store sleeping bags and blankets, folding tables and large quantities of bottled water. Locking compartments have drawers that are accessible from the interior and exterior for ease of handing out supplies.

There are two gas-powered generators and external power stations to allow 80 mobile phones to be charged simultaneously to enable communication with friends and family.

The Mobile Response Center vehicle eventually will be deployed to Houston to assist the victims of Hurricane Harvey, according to Patricia Cole, vice president of

communications for Catholic Charities USA.

Amy Collier, director of the Community Services Division of Catholic Charities of Baltimore, said, "Catholic Charities programs in the Houston area are in the process of assessing what the needs are and what location would be most helpful for the vehicle to be stationed and what services are most needed.

"It's my understanding that the vehicle will be deployed to Houston next week," Collier said Aug. 30.

Since the relief efforts along the Gulf Coast will take some time, she said it was important to work with service providers on the ground in Texas to ensure services are not duplicated. Catholic Charities USA wants to "add something that's most needed and providing it in the area where people are able to access it easily."

Later this year, specialized trailers with washing machines and dryers will be available to attach to the vehicle, according to Cathy Hassinger, director of community services for Arlington's Catholic Charities.

When it is not being used for disasters, the Mobile Response Center will rotate weekly between Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Charities in Arlington, Washington and Baltimore.

Collier said Catholic Charities of Baltimore plans to partner with other groups by going into communities where there is a large population of individuals experiencing homelessness and a lack of permanent facilities for them. "We're looking at providing referrals to other services, screening and assessing individuals for our coordinated access system, which is a centralized system to prioritize individuals for permanent housing," she said.

She said Catholic Charities also wants to use the vehicle "to engage some individuals experiencing homelessness who are reluctant to come into permanent facilities for services, try to develop relationships with them and encourage them to become more open to participating in services that are available."

Many individuals experiencing homelessness have experienced significant trauma, either from homelessness itself, from periods of incarceration, or health or

behavioral challenges. Some of them perceive the environment in permanent facilities that provide services to be dangerous, even if that's not the case. "Many may have also participated in services where they haven't been treated with dignity and respect, and they're fearful of that, or that they didn't perceive to be safe places," Collier said.

Having a mobile response unit will allow Catholic Charities to bring services closer to people, she added

"One thing that we have observed and experienced in working with people we serve that are experiencing homelessness is that distance makes a great deal of difference in terms of people's willingness to access services. To others, going three blocks may not seem like a long distance. But for some, just going across the street can create a barrier to accessing services because it's out of their area of comfort."

The mobile services can help Catholic Charities be more engaged in the community, meet people where they are and, perhaps, develop a relationship that allows people to be comfortable enough to come to facilities that are equipped to provide more holistic services on an ongoing basis, Collier said.

Also present at the press conference in Virginia were Msgr. John Enzler, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington; William J. McCarthy Jr., executive director of Catholic Charities of Baltimore; Kim Burgo, senior director of disaster response operations for Catholic Charities USA; and Art Bennett, president and CEO of Arlington's Catholic Charities.

McCarthy said, "Catholic Charities of Baltimore is the largest private provider of social services in Maryland. With this Ford Mobile Response Vehicle, we can more effectively deliver our services to the community."

"Pope Francis wants the church to be a field hospital (that) goes out and meets people where they are. This vehicle will help us do that," said Bennett, of the Arlington Diocese's Catholic Charities.

Christopher Guntz of the Catholic Review contributed to this story in Baltimore.

