

Meet the Call

Mission Lexington glorifies God by serving neighbors in need during times of crisis

by Wendy McAlister

Mission Lexington (formerly Lexington Interfaith Community Services) has been meeting the needs of Lexington County residents in crisis for more than 40 years. The organization reports meeting an average of over 35,000 cases of need in Lexington County per year, with the nature of assistance provided ranging from donating food to a family in crisis to helping cover the funeral expenses of a child. They have served the county from multiple locations through the decades, moving as needed to accommodate growth in operations, but today residents can access their thrift store, food pantry, donation center, warehouse, social services, guidance, and administration offices at their headquarters in downtown Lexington, located at 216 Harmon Street.

Thanks to the generosity of the local community and partnerships with local grocery stores and other non-profit organizations, Mission Lexington's food shelves have remained well stocked during the Covid-19 pandemic, even during nationwide food shortages. They have, however, had to drastically change their day-to-day operations in order to ensure proper social distancing and the safety of their staff, team of volunteers, and the community they serve. Administrators have witnessed firsthand the unique effects the pandemic is having on families in Lexington.

Executive Director Robin Bowers explained, "A lot of local people have been affected by Covid-19 because they have lost jobs, or their hours have been cut, or because they've had to stay home from work to take care of children, or homeschool, or because they've had a health issue." The organization relies heavily on the work of its volunteers, but when the pandemic hit, they went from utilizing the efforts of 200 volunteers a week down to zero volunteers. Robin noted that many of their volunteers are elderly, representing the community most at risk for severe illness with Covid-19.

"Our staff members have been the ones doing the work for a year," she said. "We brought some volunteers back in the beginning and we immediately had people who had been exposed to Covid-19 come in and I had to shut that down. We have been closed for only a

couple of days throughout all of this and that's because we had to quarantine at one point. We've allowed volunteers to come back in the last three months or so in specific areas and it's been absolutely up to them as to whether they wanted to come back."

Prior to Covid-19, clients would come into the food warehouse and shop its shelves like a grocery store. Since Covid, staff has been giving out packaged groceries outside the warehouse. (See image for an example of what a family of 1-3 gets.) Thanks to their "food rescue program," the organization hasn't been affected by food shortages in the long run. "We have an agreement with local gro-





cers including BI-LO, Food Lion, Target Publix, Big Lots, among others,” Robin said. “Every weekday morning, we have a refrigerator truck that goes out and grabs items from these stores to stock the pantry. Fresh frozen meat, vegetables, fruits, sweets, breads, deli items, cheese, drinks, etc. You name it, we get it. We have two walk-in freezers full of frozen meats right now.” They also welcome and appreciate donations from the community and have a current, high need for the following items: coffee, canned fruit, household cleaners, breakfast cereal, grits, oatmeal, pasta sauce, jelly, and laundry detergent.

Current Covid-19 precautionary measures in place include installed plexiglass barriers, a mask mandate for all staff and volunteers interacting with the public, and the sanitization of handles, door-knobs, shopping carts, and high-traffic areas multiple times throughout the day and in the evening. The food pantry is currently open for pre-packed food Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. - 1 p.m. Clients are directed to drive to the back of the building and remain in their car until a staff member can come out to assess the need. Clients will be asked to produce a driver’s license or ID to prove Lexington County residency.

In addition to food assistance, Mission Lexington offers crisis financial assistance in various forms including rent, mortgage, water, electric, and more. These services require a more in-depth screening process. Whereas in the past an on-site staff social worker would conduct in-person interviews with potential clients to determine their eligibility for assistance, cases are currently being vetted over the phone and online. This has created a longer process and for some, technology proves to be challenging. For those with an immediate need the preferred and quickest method of com-



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munication is to email ss@missionlexingtonsc.org. Administrators ask for patience as they work to respond as quickly and responsibly as possible to all questions and requests. According to a special notice published on their website, they strive to respond within 3-5 business days. If unable to email, phone is the next best method of communication. See the contact box for complete contact information.

The thrift shop, "Mission Store," represents another leg of the operation - providing clothing free of charge to neighbors in need. It is also a full-service thrift shop open to the public. The profits made from sales at Mission Store generate enough revenue to pay all of the organization's "campus" overhead, enabling administration to allocate more funds to directly helping families in need. When families or individuals qualify for a clothing voucher via the non-profit's social services department, they are directed to shop at the thrift store where they choose the items they need at no cost. After a brief hiatus, donations are now being accepted again. Items they accept include new and gently used clothing; shoes; purses; household goods; furniture; working large appliances; and gently used mattresses. Items they do not currently accept include cribs; car seats; older mattresses; older TV's and computer monitors; VHS tapes; tires; printers;

large desks; pianos; ceiling fans; light fixtures; and broken, damaged, dirty, or torn furniture and appliances. Current Mission Store shopping hours are Monday - Saturday, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. Donation center hours are Monday - Friday, 10 a.m. - 12.45 p.m. The donation center is located at the rear of the Harmon Street building and folks drop-

ping off items are asked to drive around back and wait on a staff or volunteer to help unload and to provide a tax receipt. Administration prefers to work with volunteers who can help consistently, on a weekly basis. They are taking volunteers again, but slowly, in areas where social distancing can be accomplished. Volunteers must be at least 16 years of age. Volunteers under the age of 16 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian at all times. Tasks volunteers may find themselves doing include food donation receiving, donation sorting, pricing and tagging, food donation sort and stock, pre-packing food, and food distribution. In the Social Services

department, volunteers are needed in the positions of receptionist and interviewer. In the thrift shop, cash register operator and sales floor merchandiser are needed. There are even "Help from Home" opportunities available. Check out the website's volunteer page for more details. Robin emphasized the importance of their relationship with other community groups. "I'm big on referrals to other resources in the community that can provide other services than what we do here."

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She recognized the SNAP program, Sistercare, Midlands Fatherhood Coalition, Good Samaritan Clinic, Nancy K. Perry Home, Chris Myers Children's Shelter, Samaritan's Well, Central Midlands Transitional Veterans Retreat, Lexington County school districts, Dickerson Children's Advocacy Center, Lexington County and the Town of Lexington police departments, and the network of 65 plus churches they partner with.

"I want to express our gratitude for what the community has done for us. It's overwhelming," Robin said. "We have a huge network of folks who support us. We can't do what we do without them." ■

MISSION LEXINGTON
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