

VALENCIA COUNTY ABUNDANT GRACE FREE STORE

In 2009 the Pastor of the Peralta Memorial United Methodist Church, David Blackwell, formed a task force to investigate the possibility of opening a Free Store like one in Columbus, Ohio, here in Valencia County, New Mexico.

The task force found: Poverty is an emphatic social determinant in Valencia County. Nineteen percent (19%) of all county residents live below the Federal poverty level. The poverty rate for children under 18 is 28% and for single-mothers raising their children with no partner present, 51% live below the poverty level. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey) Many of these low-income individuals and families live in housing that is substandard in neighborhoods that have access to few, if any, services, particularly in the more outlying areas of the county. Homelessness is increasingly apparent in the county.

In addition, the task force found that in Socorro County the poverty level is significantly higher than the state wide average in New Mexico. According to the US Census there are 31.8% of Socorro County residents with income below the poverty level. In addition 14.9% of residents live below 50% of the poverty level in 2007. According to the US Census Income and Poverty 2004 estimate model, 23.6% of county residents of all ages live in poverty, including 33.9% of children under the age of 18. There has been an increase since 2004 from 23.6% to 30.4% of all people in poverty and a slight decrease from 33.9% to 32.6% of children under age 18 in poverty.

The task force recommended opening the Free Store near Belen in the Southern part of Valencia County in order to serve the neediest from Valencia County and Northern Socorro County. The key concept behind this ministry is to “work **with** the poor, not **for** or **to** the poor.” The Free Store tries to answer the call for “Divine Economy of Abundance.” According to this understanding of asset based community development, God has ordered creation so that there is more than enough of every good gift. Positive transformation occurs in any community precisely to the degree that people invest the first and best portions of their God given resources to care for one another. Instead of focusing on the negative dimensions of what the community or individuals lack, the divine economy of abundance focuses on assets, inviting people to work together to achieve common goals.

In November 2010 the Free Store opened in Belen in an aging strip mall. This ministry is more than a “store;” the goal is to create a space where we can live faithfully with our neighbors, providing a place for people to gather, to have a cup of coffee together, to talk, to be heard, to get household goods and supplies that they might need for setting up an apartment or home, to use a computer to apply for a job or to fill out government paperwork. It is a place to be together, a community. The idea is that if the door is unlocked, the coffee pot is on. It is called

a “free store” because the idea is not to have any eligibility requirements for people to get what they need and to allow people to get donated items without charge.

Initial funding was received by the United Methodist Albuquerque District Office Mission’s Committee from the Thaxton Grant to get the Belen store and another one in Albuquerque at the Harwood United Methodist Church (now Grace United Methodist Church) operational. At the Harwood location, the funds were used to purchase a portable classroom modular building from the Albuquerque Public Schools, relocate it to Harwood, use existing water, gas and electric connections, purchase handicap accessible ramps and loading dock, install double doors at loading dock and additional door to facilitate entrance and exit of clients, and renovate the restroom to add a shower (with a hot water heater) for homeless clients. At the Belen site, the funds were used to rent space in a shopping center until it was destroyed in a fire in March 2011 and then to relocate to a more convenient site on NM 47 also in Belen (now Rio Communities). Funds were also used to purchase two container units (storage sheds) at both locations for storage because of the increase in donations.

While the focus at Harwood is on household items and furniture, the Valencia County Free Store is primarily focused on the distribution of clothes, shoes, books, baby items and small household items.

The Valencia County Free Store serves, on average, 100 families on each day that the store is open. At this time we have volunteers from many churches in the valley including the founding church. We also have volunteers from New Mexico Works which requires their participants to volunteer a certain amount of hours in order to continue receiving their benefits. Each individual works three months or until they find a paid position.

The approximate Valencia County Free Store annual budget is \$18,000 and is run completely through volunteer efforts. It is our goal to eventually be able to pay an Executive Director and are hopeful that it will lead to other paid staff. It is also the goal of the Board to possibly acquire a larger space for the store with adequate property for multiple storage units, parking and less resistance from businesses in the area.

In the future it would be exciting to partner with medical and dental professionals so that there could be low or no cost services to the families we serve. With poor dental health in young children and adolescents the outcomes for good health aren’t likely. Many families have little access to these services other and when they do it is on an emergency basis. There are other possibilities for growth but starting small and growing slowly is going to be the path we take for now.

We are also proud to say that we have a four minute video of the store in operation which was created by one of the Free Store Board members. The video is used to build those critical

partnerships with members of the community including the local food pantry, churches, businesses and civic organizations that support the Free Store.

The Free Store is an amazing community ministry which has been helpful for many families and individuals in Valencia and Socorro Counties. It is important to emphasize that the workers/volunteers are blessed by the responses of shoppers as they realize that things in the store are REALLY FREE. The shoppers are blessed to be welcomed, treated with respect, dignity and without judgment to their situation.