

What has been the impact of the Migrant Shelter at Rincon Congregational UCC?

The Migrant Shelter has had a significant impact on our guests, our congregation and our community. During the time that we have been open, we have served almost 600 guests; these include infants, toddlers, young children, teenagers, and their parents. In the midst of the political chaos surrounding immigration in our country, we provided a warm welcome, nourishing food, a safe place to sleep, and the means to connect with sponsors and move to their next location. This is truly sanctuary.

Members of Rincon UCC and the surrounding community donated money, time, and effort to make this possible. Much of the impact on us was intangible, like one volunteer who stated, "It was an opportunity to express my humanity." Many of us experienced a sense of hope while volunteering because it allowed us to do something tangible to help others. However, this ministry caused anxiety among some members of our congregation who did not feel able to help or who were worried about how this ministry would affect the church. During this process, we studied the effect this has had on various aspects of church life; here are some details about this impact.

Worship

Overall, we saw an increase in worship from the date the shelter opened. The 8:45 service initially declined but quickly grew back to stronger numbers than in the month before. The 10:45 service saw a definite increase in numbers from the beginning of the shelter program. Several people became members of the church, citing the shelter program as their primary reason for joining. In addition, a number of people without a church home have been volunteers at the shelter, offering a great opportunity for outreach into the community.

Finances

Financially, our congregation has been incredibly generous and was also supported by significant donations for this ministry beyond our walls. Rincon UCC members contributed a little more than 1/3 of the monetary donations received; other funding has come from our denomination, from Justice Alliance, from our neighbors, and other community donations. We received more than enough money to run this program so far, allowing us to plan for more ministry in the future. In kind donations of food, clothing and bedding have been phenomenal. We cannot thank you all enough! We were able to ensure that all donations of food, clothing, bedding and money went for its intended purposes; where we had extra food and supplies, we transported them to other migrant shelters who were very grateful for these contributions.

Here's an important thing to note: we accomplished all this while maintaining our regular giving to overall church programming. Looking at church finances confirms that people's generosity to the migrant ministries was *over and above* their regular giving. In fact, it appears that we received slightly more than anticipated, so the net effect on regular church giving is a small gain.

We also were able to receive very significant levels of funding from outside of our congregation, both in terms of money and gifts-in-kind, like food and other donations. All of this was achieved without a fundraising plan. We believe there is ample room for growth by conducting fundraisers that would appeal to a broad range of people across the country and in Southern Arizona who have expressed an eagerness to help us serve migrants.

We also worked closely with our rental programs to ensure that we met our obligations and worked in partnership with community groups. We did not lose rental income during this period.

Church Programs

Initially, a few programs were cancelled because we were utilizing space for the migrant shelter or because of staff commitments. However, the vast majority of church programming continued with little interruption during the time of the shelter. One of the major commitments of the planning process moving forward is to ensure that there is adequate space and time for church programming. We believe that we have clear and workable solutions that will make this possible in the future.

Pastoral Care

Both the pastor and the Called to Care team continued to provide spiritual care to all who requested it during the time that the shelter has been operating. This took tremendous effort and commitment on their part, which we deeply appreciate. While some have expressed concern about pastoral needs being met—and this is a very important issue for a congregation—we believe it is a credit to our pastor and congregation that this has not been a problem. However, it is also important that our future plans ensure that meeting spiritual care needs is sustainable.

Volunteering

Overall, volunteers expressed a very positive experience. In our survey, 82% expressed satisfaction with their volunteer work with the shelter. A strong majority would recommend this experience to their friends and felt that their work had a positive impact. Several people reported negative experiences, which can be addressed in our future planning. The comments generally reflected a sense of satisfaction helpful suggestions, and an eagerness to continue to volunteer.

Several volunteers who do not identify as religious people expressed how welcomed they felt. They recognized that many people were there as volunteers because of their faith but said they were grateful that they never felt pressured about religion and look forward to continuing to volunteer with us.

Spiritually

Overall, we have tremendously positive feedback about the spiritual impact that this ministry has had on our volunteers and members. A few people have expressed a sense of guilt or regret that they are not able to participate because of other commitments, like full time work and family responsibilities, or because of physical and financial limitations. In the future, we will be clearer about ways to support this ministry from a variety of perspectives and abilities. We truly believe that we can all contribute in some way and that no one should feel guilty about their level of support. Not everyone will be called to this ministry, and that is as it should be. Each of us should prayerfully discern what we are personally called to do.

For those who do feel called to this, however, this has been and can be a life-transforming experience. It has been humbling and rewarding to walk with those families seeking a better life. We have laughed with the children, cried with their parents, and been moved by their witness. We believe that the spiritual benefits to our church, our community, and our world are significant. This does affirm our common humanity. Many people—those who attend Rincon and those from the wider community—

have expressed impatience to get back to volunteering at the Rincon Migrant Shelter. We believe that this is a sign of spiritual health and of our vocation to this type of ministry.

Summary

This ministry emerged as a response to a crisis situation and, naturally, had some initial bumps along the way. The overall impact, however, has been positive—increased attendance, strong material and financial support, eagerness to continue volunteering, and spiritual growth. We believe that this ministry offers a vital opportunity to serve the needs of migrants and to build connections within the congregation and in the wider community.