



Keep the meals rolling

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North Minneapolis Meals on Wheels (NMMOW) is still rolling along, regularly serving hot meals to their clients. A recent St. Olaf Community Campus open house celebrated the program's relationships with supporters and local nonprofits.

NMMOW Executive Director Denise Harris pointed out in an MSR interview last November that her organization needed additional funds to keep operating at its current level ["Hot meals ease hunger and loneliness," NMMOW said]. "In past years, we would raise a couple of thousands of dollars between the [local] churches, and about \$10,000 in individual contributions," she explained. "We didn't need a lot of money, just \$12,000 to meet our current budget.

"[However] since [the MSR] ran that story last Thanksgiving," Harris continued, "we have raised some \$18,000 in grants and individual donations for North Minneapolis Meals on Wheels. That was a huge increase for us. It just has been a phenomenal raise of awareness in the community. The North Side has stepped up to the plate."

Since Harris came aboard as executive director last September, NMMOW has undergone some restructuring in order to operate more effectively. "What we are trying to do is apply all those concepts that you apply in a for-profit business to a nonprofit business on the operations side to save money," she said.

"Like many nonprofit organizations, in order to survive it is so critical that we pool our resources and come together. That's what [funders and donors] are looking for, too — they want us to work together and make good business decisions. We deal with both private and public money," Harris said.

NMMOW currently has around 60 volunteers. NMMOW Board Chairwoman Laura Pugh, who joined six years ago as a volunteer and has been a board member for the past two years, added that more always are needed. "No question, we could keep them busy," she said. "It can be anything from doing it for one hour a week, to even a couple of hours a month. It depends on what kind of commitment the person wants to make."

"Our current volunteers are so energized because they see some change, and they see people joining them," noted Harris.

U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) and Minneapolis City Council Member Don Samuels both helped deliver meals to clients on May 14.

"There was a time in the lives of the people we are serving today when they were working long hours on a job and serving people, their family and doing a lot for folks," Ellison explained. "Now they need somebody to do something for them."

"Don't go feeling sorry for someone," Ellison added. "Compassion is not just doing a good deed for somebody. It is doing something for somebody knowing that you will need someone to do something for you one day."

"It is important for me to touch the hands of people who need help," said Samuels, "and to see where they live. It's important for me to take some time out of my day and meet with the people who are doing the serving and get to know what they do, and get to know what I can do for them."

"I think it is so critical that our political representatives are involved with Meals on Wheels," said Harris.

In addition to delivering hot meals five days a week, NMMOV also delivers two “shelf-stable” meals to each client through the winter and summer months, Harris pointed out. “It is something you can put on the shelf and it doesn’t need a refrigerator, [so that] just in case we can’t deliver the hot meal, they will have something to eat. We include soup, JELL-O, pudding, a drink and a granola bar.

“With the help of for-profit and nonprofit businesses, we provided excellent shelf-stable meals free of charge to the client,” she added. “[The shelf-stable meals] are something you want to eat.”

The May 12 open house was held at St. Olaf Nursing Home, where the nonprofit St. Olaf Community Campus was announced. It featured NMMOW, Third Way Housing, Pillsbury United Communities, New Directions Youth Ministry, Volunteers of America (VOA) Day Shelter program, along with St. Olaf Lutheran Church and St. Olaf Residence, all located on the 2900 block of Emerson Avenue North.

“We feel this is a historic moment for the Hawthorne neighborhood,” proclaimed St. Olaf pastor Dale Hume. Harris called it a “one-stop center” for community services.

“They say we have more agencies working in North Minneapolis than anywhere else [in Minneapolis], but we are not really connected,” Harris noted. “The campus is a wonderful thing that our community needs most. We have to support the organizations that can help and quickly respond to unique individual needs in real time.”

Finally, as excited as she is with NMMOW’s present situation, Harris says more work is needed. In addition to attracting more volunteers, “We are still building our relationships with the churches, and we are working on building some relationships with the mega-churches in the first-ring suburbs north of us,” she pointed out.

Nonetheless, “We are going to stay in business for 2008, and we are preparing for 2009,” Harris proudly announced.

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