

Project Winterize successful during winter season

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The Cathedral of St. Andrew's location in the heart of the capital city comes with an unanticipated side effect — an up-close look at the homeless population downtown.

For years, parishioners at the Cathedral have created several initiatives to care for these vulnerable people.

"Project Winterize" is a fledgling outreach program designed to lessen the suffering of those living outside in Little Rock and North Little Rock during the winter months. The bread and butter of the program are "winterize kits" — backpacks stuffed with useful items.

Local organizations have estimated that there are around 1,000 homeless people in Little Rock and North Little Rock, concentrated in the downtown areas.

Rector Father Joseph de Orbegozo said parishioners found themselves awakened to the realities of what homeless people are facing, especially during the colder weather.

"I think the Cathedral is the perfect place for this because we are in the middle of downtown, unlike most parishes," he said. "... We're more of a place where the homeless feel comfortable being around. I think it also helps too that you have the presence of other churches that historically help the homeless, like the Methodist church and the Presbyterian church, really close by."

The project began before the 2023-2024 winter season when Cathedral volunteers gave out 183 kits. For the past 2024-2025 winter season, the team passed out 585 winterize kits. About 250 kits were assembled during an "assembly party" hosted by parishioners. The kits were also distributed by religious organizations, Knights of Columbus Council #812 in Little Rock and the Cathedral of St. Andrew Men's Club.

"There are some people that are unsheltered who will never be sheltered because they have substance abuse problems or behavior problems," said John Gillham, one of the 27 parishioners who served on the team. "We're not trying to get them sheltered ... we want to make their lives less miserable and lessen a terrible experience through a cold winter."

Inside the backpacks are a large, thick sheet of plastic to stay dry, a blanket or large throw, a hat or beanie, a large garbage bag that can be used as a makeshift poncho, an emergency space blanket and a pair of wool socks.



The winterize kits are stuffed with materials to help the vulnerable unsheltered stay warm and dry. (Courtesy John Gillham)

The team is very intentional about the goods that they buy and gather for the kits.

“The criticism we got was, ‘Why don’t you get them something nicer?’ ... They aren’t going to keep that heavy blanket and other stuff in their backpack throughout the summer. They’re going to discard it,” said member Barbara Bender.

“Most of them are nomads, so if they just hold onto the backpack and a couple of other things, this is a success,” Gillham added.

Also, there is the fear that if the homeless are given new, nicer items, they could become the victim of theft or violence, or they could feel pressured to sell the item.

The Project Winterize initiative is part of a larger umbrella initiative at the Cathedral called “Samaritans.” The umbrella organizations helps oversee Project Winterize and Project Warming Center Meals (another Cathedral initiative), along with any other future outreach projects.

The Project Winterize team is also willing to prepare some kits for other parishes in the state, hoping it will encourage other parishes to join in the initiative, so long as they promise the kits will go to those living on the streets.

“There’s so many homeless around our parish, and they’re in our parish — they’re ours. ... We have to focus on the unsheltered homeless ... which are the, as far as the homeless go, the

poorest of the poor,” Bender said.

“Christ said it to all of us — it was a mandate to all Christians. In effect, whatever you did to those folks, you did to me,” Gillham said. “I’m not speaking for Christ, but if you let these people stay out in the cold and freeze all night, then you did it to Christ.”

“It’s not just about doing good for people,” Father de Orbegozo said. “It’s also about this deep spiritual good, which is happening when we are recognizing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We’re recognizing that Christ is in the person who is downtrodden on the outs and is calling to us from that person in that same way that person can call us to something more — we can call them to know that they are not alone.”

How you can help

The Project Winterize team is preparing for the 2025-2026 winter season. If you want to make a financial donation or donate winterize kit items, or if you are a parish or organization hoping to work with the Project Winterize team, call the Cathedral office at (501) 374-2794 or email info@csalr.org.