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## New twist on Galveston County emergency aid



James Nielsen, Staff

*Doug and Lisa Johle present a voucher to food pantry supervisor Loa Hecken-dorn at M.I. Lewis Social Services, one of four nonprofits in a new program.*

By Harvey Rice

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**GALVESTON** - Galveston County thinks it can better assist residents who are down on their luck by eliminating the county department they come to for assistance.

By eliminating the Social Services Department section that provided temporary aid for rent and utility payments, the county was able to shift its temporary assistance program to four nonprofit agencies already performing the same service.

The move saved the county \$220,000 and enabled commissioners to add \$25,000 to the \$140,000 a year it was spending on temporary assistance, Community Services Director Connie Nicholson

said.

"These organizations are already in the business of providing these services and helping people in the county," said Tyler Drummond, deputy chief of staff to Galveston County Judge Mark Henry. "Why not aid them by giving them money?"

Galveston County is one of the first, if not the first, to farm out its rental aid services to nonprofits, according to the Texas Association of Counties. If other counties have tried it, "I've not heard about it," said Lonnie Hunt, association spokesman. "If the end result is there is more money literally going to the people who need the help yet the county is expending less tax dollars than they were, then that sounds pretty innovative to me."

Innovative or not, even with the increased \$25,000, the amount of aid falls far short of meeting the need, leaders of the nonprofits say.

Commissioners unanimously approved contracts last week, splitting the county among four social service agencies. Interfaith Caring Ministries in League City received \$33,000 for the northern part of the county; M.I. Lewis Social Services in Dickinson, \$49,500 for mid-county; the Salvation Army in Texas City, \$55,000 for south county; and St. Vincent's House in Galveston, \$22,000 for the island. The remaining \$5,500 will pay for administration, Nicholson said.

Nicholson said she expected to hand over the money to the four nonprofits by the end of the year, after regulations for using the county money are completed. The county now limits temporary assistance to \$150 per person, with exceptions given in extraordinary circumstances. Nicholson said the nonprofits will help write the new regulations.

Suzy Domingo, executive director of Interfaith Caring Ministries, hopes the money will allow the charity to increase its \$200 per person cap on assistance to \$300.

Typically, applicants must cobble together donations from a number of agencies, including the county, to come up with the money they need for rent or a utility payment. In the past, nonprofits referred clients to the county for additional funds.

"What this eliminates is another place where the client in need has to go and ask for assistance," Domingo said.

Those few who try to abuse the system by hopping from agency to agency seeking aid will likely be caught by a United Way computer program that tracks applicants at every nonprofit in the county. Fooling the agencies with a false identity will be difficult because each requires a substantial number of documents.

Although the money is welcome, it is not nearly enough to meet a demand that increases each year. Michael

Jackson, executive director of St. Vincent's House, said his charity gave \$64,000 in direct emergency aid last year and is projected to give about \$92,000 this year.

Domingo said demand for services at Interfaith Caring Ministries for the first 10 months of this year was up 15 percent over last year.

"I've been a Salvation Army officer for about 10 years, and there is always need in the community," said Capt. Mark Jacobs, the Salvation Army's Galveston County regional coordinator. "There are many people in Galveston County that live right on the edge, and I see that every day."

Commissioners Court might give more of the \$220,000 it's saving to the nonprofits if an evaluation of the program next year shows that it's working well, Nicholson said.

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