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Norton parish runs summer feeding program for children

by Steve Neill
of The Catholic Virginian

"We do this because God wants us to do it," is Hortense Mooney's response when asked why she volunteers with a summer feeding program at St. Anthony Parish in Norton.

"We don't do it because it makes everybody feel good," she added.

But if feeling good comes from helping children who might otherwise go hungry because their families don't have enough money for food, so much the better.

The summer feeding program, sponsored by the diocesan Office of Justice and Peace in its Norton office, started as a result of the Appalachian Fund which was established earlier this year.

"We offer six grants of \$750 each to the parishes in southwestern Virginia," explained Justin Reilly, regional coordinator of the Norton office. "Parishes can apply for these grants outlining their plans to either start a social ministry or sustain an existing program."

Mr. Reilly encouraged parishes in the Appalachian region to establish an outreach which would improve the lives of people in an area where many are held back because of low incomes. He made personal visits to them and explained how the Office of Justice and Peace wished to help with their personal involvement.



Beverly Willis, left, and Hortense Mooney prepare bag lunches. Other volunteers are in the kitchen preparing the food.

"St. Anthony's responded very well," Mr. Reilly told The Catholic Virginian, adding that the parish formed a justice and peace committee.

"I facilitated a conversation on the needs of the community and asked them what aspect of poverty did they want to address," he continued. "I asked questions to get people talking."

At the end of the meeting the consensus of St. Anthony parishioners was to begin a feeding program during the summer when school would be out and students would not have access to meals the school system provides when classes are in session.

"I continue to be impressed with how resourceful they are," Mr. Reilly said of the St. Anthony parishioners who got the ball rolling.

The volunteers contacted Norton Elementary School and the principal agreed to send out a letter to parents with a form to be filled out if they wanted their children to be recipients during the summer. The letters were mailed to parents whose children received a free lunch at the school.

"The idea behind our program was to fill the gap during the summer," Mr. Reilly said.

Volunteers come three days a week — Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday — to the parish kitchen at St. Anthony's to prepare the lunches. The simple meals consist of sandwiches, fruit and chips and go to between 30 and 40 children, with the meals taken to their homes.

"Some didn't have adequate transportation to get to the church so the volunteers split up into teams to deliver the lunches to their homes," Mr. Reilly explained.

Volunteers who are working with the eight-week program are Anthony and Beverly Willis, Melody Day, Hortense Mooney and Barbara Bass. "I would expect the program might be five days next summer and we hope to make it an ecumenical effort next year," Mr. Reilly said.

"This summer was a test run, so to speak," he added. "The volunteers worked hard at really making the feeding program a success we can build on for next year."