Once an HIV Laundry Service, Auntie Helen's Now Offers Much More

Its COVID-19 work helped earn the San Diego charity thrift store a leadership award. Rod Legg updates us on its offerings.

November 13, 2020 By Trent Straube

Launched in 1988 as a laundry service for people with AIDS in San Diego, Auntie Helen's is better known today as a local thrift store that raises funds and provides clothes to people with HIV in need. But it offers many other services—and to a growing number of clients. In fact, the team at Auntie Helen's, led by executive director Rod Legg, pivoted during the COVID-19 pandemic to expand its services to people affected by the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Those efforts along with the history of Auntie Helen's earned the group's founder, Gary Cheatham, a posthumous Leadership Award from ABC 10News last month (watch a video about that award above). We recently spoke with Legg to learn more about Auntie Helen's.

First off, how are you and your team doing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The pandemic has been challenging in many ways for the Auntie Helen's team. During the initial phase of the pandemic, we closed our doors. Volunteers and staff were idled to prevent their exposure. I was the only member of our team who became ill and subsequently cleared after quarantining. However, the healing process for COVID-19 for me continues. We were able to partially reopen after establishing a safe plan as recommended by the county health department.

How has COVID-19 affected the thrift store?

Our in-store shopping has been suspended to reduce risk of infection. We now operate as a sidewalk sale to continue to fund our services. We have purchased nine new rolling racks, and we roll a great selection to the sidewalk to safeguard our valued customers, clients and volunteers.

From Trader Joe's to daily pick ups to case workers who deliver, we are serving 503 clients with underlying health...

Posted by auntie helens thrift\charity on Monday, October 26, 2020

Tell us about the other programs at Auntie Helen's and how COVID-19 is affecting your work.

Clients are referred to our program for clothing, laundry and/or food by medical groups, like the Family Health Centers, the Owen Clinic, Christie's Place and the San Diego LGBT Center. A monthly clothing allowance is provided to clients who can then shop for clothing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand [for our food distribution program]. We are now feeding 503 families with underlying health conditions with a week's worth of groceries every week delivered by case managers and social workers all over San Diego. We also supply food to Father Joe's Villages [a nonprofit that fights homelessness] to help feed the 500 to 1,000 people in shelters around the city. Food comes from a variety of sources, [including] donations from grocery stores and individuals and purchases by Auntie Helen's Thrift. We have partnered with Trader Joe's, Solomon Bagels and Donuts, Target and small organizations, like the San Diego Bears, who have ongoing food drives to reach these growing numbers of those in need. Our volunteers sort donated food and assemble food packages and hand them to case managers for delivery on Mondays and Tuesdays. On Saturday, clients who wish to pick up food are scheduled to come in throughout the day.

We refer clients to other community service organizations when needed. We have passed out over 3,000 hygiene kits and blankets over the past six months. We provide these products for clients who may be homeless or indigent along with free access to donated, basic medical equipment related to activities of daily living, such as shower chairs, walkers, canes, etc.

The original mission of Auntie Helen's Fluff n Fold was to provide a laundry service for HIV-affected people who were unable to do their own laundry and were ostracized by commercial laundries and the greater community in the mid-'80s. At one time, we had many washers and dryers running six days a week to meet this need. Today, we are glad to say that we meet the demand with only one washer and dryer. We happily provide this service when it is requested.

How has COVID-19 affected your clients and their needs?

Requests for food services has multiplied since the pandemic. It is more difficult for clients to come to our location for services as their HIV status may make them more vulnerable. Instead of primarily being a food pickup location for our clients, we now work with case managers from community organizations to have food delivered directly to clients. To further reduce their risk of exposure, we are creating an internet store for clients in need of clothing.

Come check out the new and improved sidewalk sale!

Posted by auntie helens thrift\charity on Wednesday, October 7, 2020

How did you get involved with Auntie Helen's?

Like many people involved with Auntie Helen's, I volunteered after having a rough patch in my own life. I had experienced hardship and wanted to be a part of the solution. Also, when I was growing up, I had a grandmother who encouraged me to help those in need. This laid the foundation for what I am doing now.

You have plans to expand beyond the thrift store, right?

When COVID-19 precautions end, our plan is to expand services to our clients. We are in the process of creating a safe space for our clients to access direct services, improve accessibility to the internet for related support and host holistic health events online or on-site. For those clients who need support in their recovery from substance abuse, we plan to offer meeting space for small groups. We are also considering sharing our space with case managers and social workers to meet with clients.

Can you give us some general information about your clients?

Auntie Helen’s clients are primarily HIV-affected persons, and they represent our larger community’s diversity, from young adults to the elderly. We serve all the HIV-affected community in need and provide an opportunity to those who are self-sufficient (or better) to contribute through volunteering and donating goods. While we do provide support to people who are homeless and to injection drug users when referred to us or directly requested, our primary focus is the HIV-affected community.

Pardon our Dust! Painting is underway as we transform to a revitalized and vibrant updated location...

Posted by auntie helens thrift\charity on Sunday, November 1, 2020

Finally, what’s in the future for Auntie Helen’s?

In addition to our current plans to increase services and expand our support to recovery groups and to provide a safe space, we partnered with HandsOn for volunteers to paint our entire building. We are transforming the building into a colorful Barnum & Bailey–style circus tent with bright colors and artistic flare. We need something to make us smile during these uncertain times.

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