

May 23, 2024

'Sanctuary' : More Than A Place to Worship *churches as cooling centers - the Arizona Faith Network*

Earlier this month, Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold, Week of Compassion's Associate Director for Domestic Disaster Response, spent a week in Arizona, visiting congregations and partners, and participating and leading at the annual meeting of National VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Assisting in Disaster). A significant focus during her visit was connecting with Rev. Katie Sexton, Disciples pastor and Executive Director of the [Arizona Faith Network](#), "an interfaith organization building bridges across diverse Arizona communities to work for the common good."



Through grants both to Arizona Faith Network and participating local Disciples churches, **Week of Compassion supports one of Arizona Faith Network's primary programs: their work operating extreme heat respite centers.** It is a model effort for other communities, establishing cooling and hydration centers in local congregations to provide relief and resources that quite literally save lives.

As the Arizona Faith Network shares, *Extreme heat poses a severe threat to vulnerable communities in Arizona, necessitating robust support and relief efforts. AFN has been at the forefront of providing essential resources and assistance through its Heat Relief program. AFN bridges a crucial gap by offering life-saving heat relief services through cooling centers in houses of worship across Maricopa County.*

These centers provide a welcoming space for community members and their pets during the heat season (May - September), offering cooling facilities, water, healthy snacks, and access to wrap-around services with community partners, ensuring much-needed rest for those facing extreme temperatures. These heat respite centers uniquely allow community members to come inside with their pets and sleep, providing vital support during months of scorching heat. Our cooling centers uphold non-discriminatory practices, welcoming all individuals regardless of age, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or familial status.

During the summer of 2023, Arizona Faith Network provided heat relief at least 26,000 times across



13 sites in the greater Phoenix area. An astonishing 80% of heat relief visits were among people identified as experiencing homelessness, and 28% were experiencing symptoms of heat-related illness upon check-in to the heat relief site. The season resulted in record-breaking heat-caused and heat-related fatalities in Arizona. In this dire context, the AFN Centers remain beacons of hope, tirelessly working to alleviate the suffering and safeguard the lives of those most vulnerable in the community.

The Glendale Mission and Ministry Center is one such cooling center hosted and managed by Disciples congregation Iglesia Dios de Segunda Oportunida.

Jonathan and Ruben Guzman, lay leaders at Iglesia Dios de Segunda Oportunida, serve as the site leader and one of the site assistants throughout the summer. Site staff are instrumental in connecting those who come for heat respite and hydration to a full range of resources for their care and well-being, as well as coordinating with church members and other volunteers who provide support for the Center's operations.



Glendale MMC is one of three essential sites hosted in Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations, operating seamlessly in collaboration with AFN resources and staff.

As part of the NVOAD conference in Phoenix, Rev. Hamilton-Arnold moderated a panel about the cross-sector collaborations between academic, nonprofit, faith community, and government leaders to provide heat relief in the greater Phoenix area – efforts which Week of Compassion has supported through the Arizona Faith Network.



Before the session, one of the panelists asked about who to connect with from a particular NVOAD Member organization. A woman who had arrived in the room early spoke up, "Me! I'm the person to connect with!" The two had great conversation before and after the workshop about how to get more connected with the heat relief work in the area. As part of the NVOAD gathering, participants also prepared 1500 Heat Relief Kits for distribution at various heat relief and cooling centers this summer.

Extreme weather preparedness reduces the call for disaster response, and Week of Compassion is eagerly

engaged in partnerships – like the Arizona Faith Network and National VOAD – that provide resources, ideas, and collaborations that lead to tangible compassion, life-giving options, and community transformation.

all photos via Week of Compassion




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