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Project Community Connect brings service providers together

- By Dana Melius Special to The Free Press
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Angie Schafer styles the hair of Sister Neuhope, of Mankato, during Project Community Connect on Tuesday in the Mayo Clinic Health System Event Center.

For Kate Hengy-Gretz, decades of service to people in need continue. As one of the organizers for Tuesday's Project Community Connect, it brings smiles to her and those who attend the Mankato event.

With more than 80 booths from throughout the Greater Mankato region at the Mayo Clinic Health System Event Center, information from health care to affordable housing, along with free food and and guidance “for anyone struggling financially” is provided.

“We’re just so excited to bring this back,” Hengy-Gretz said, as dozens of volunteers swirled around her.

Billed as an annual spring event, it’s been staggered a bit over the two-year pandemic. Last year, the expo was held in August to smaller crowds with COVID-19 protocols.

The crowd for this year’s event was bustling once again. And Hengy-Gretz couldn’t have been more pleased.

“I love connecting people to resources,” she said. “Knowledge is power.”

The past two years have been difficult for many, particularly those with limited income. The pandemic, the end of the rent moratorium, and climbing inflation have stretched people’s budgets and are looking for whatever help possible, Hengy-Gretz said.

“People want to find every way possible to help get them through.”

Hengy-Gretz, who has been a part of Project Community Connect for the past 11 years, said interpreters were made available for those who needed it.

Her “real job” is with Lutheran Social Service as crisis nursery facilitator. Prior to that, she spent over 30 years with Minnesota Valley Action Council.

“When you’re in social work, you never get everything done,” she said. So the event just might allow for some catchup and for individuals to fit in visits with several service providers, while also bouncing into old friends.



Stylist Ashley Rocheford wraps up a haircut with Barb Herrley, of Mankato.
Dana Melius, special to The Free Press

One of the event’s more popular services is free haircuts and styling. Thirty stylists were expected to provide about 250 free haircuts during the three-hour event. For some, it’s the only haircut they might receive all year, Hengy-Gretz noted.

For stylist Ashley Rocheford, it’s a special gift she can bring to the event.

“I love it. I love making other people beautiful,” she said. “I love making them happy.”

Stylist Angie Schafer, of St. Peter, helping attendee Sister Neuhope, of Mankato, brought big smiles to both. And Neuhope loved the attention and conversation.

Fiscal sponsor for the event is the Greater Mankato Area United Way. Elizabeth Harstad, the organization's director of community impact, was pleased the event could again be held in the spring after changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It really fits well with our mission at the United Way," she said. "If we can connect people to the resources that are available for them, we're happy to be supporting them."



Partners for Housing staff visit with guests at Project Community Connect in Mankato. Affordable housing and the end of a rent moratorium are among critical needs throughout the Greater Mankato region.
Dana Melius, special to The Free Press

Pleased with the 85 booths and service providers who registered for the event, Harstad also praised the dozens of volunteers and leadership team that met throughout the year to bring together the wide array of resources for guests.

“We have a number of new organizations this year participating for the first time,” she said.

Harstad said the greatest needs continue to be affordable housing and a shortage in mental health services and providers.