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System stays alert to needs

John Faherty
The Arizona Republic
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Many people in our community could use a helping hand but don't know where to look.

At the same time, there are countless people who are looking for a way to help others.

Now, there is a program bringing them together.
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The Red/Blue Alert System is run by people at ValueOptions, the firm that provides mental-health services for Maricopa County. It is also contracted to deal with people who have drug and alcohol problems.

When you are dealing with the poor, the mentally ill and the addicted, the list of needs can pile up. It can fill notebooks. It can keep you up at night.

Just ask Melanie Eldridge.

After several years as a mental-health worker, she knew all about the needs. She also knew about all the people looking to help.

So Eldridge started building a database of needs. Then, she created a list of people who provide services.

It started with 17 agencies and faith-based organizations that wanted to help. There are now 500 people and agencies involved.

Imagine a poor family needs a bed for a child who has outgrown a crib.

When a social worker, church volunteer or state or county employee finds out about that family, he or she sends an e-mail to ValueOptions. That need is a Red Alert.

The Red Alert is then turned around and e-mailed to all 500 who have joined the program. Each might forward the alert to others who can help.

Within hours, thousands of people could learn about this family that needs a bed.

When information about an available spare bed is sent in, that's a Blue Alert.

And as soon as that night, that child could have a bed.

What's refreshing about the system is the speed. A need is identified. A resource is located. The two are linked up. Problem solved.

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Eldridge works with Karen Habbeshaw on the Red/Blue Alert program. Habbeshaw receives the e-mails looking for help. She turns them around and waits for a response. About 1,000 calls for help have come in. They have solved about 75 percent of them.

"It is awesome," Habbeshaw said. "I absolutely love what I do here. You get to see the difference you are making. It's a wonderful feeling."

Almost immediately, the program started helping more than just ValueOptions clients. At this point, the majority of the people helped by the program have nothing to do with ValueOptions.

Habbeshaw and Eldridge both point to the same story as their favorite example of the system working.

There was a homeless Phoenix woman in a wheelchair. Her health was failing, and she could not get around anymore. She needed an electric wheelchair.

An e-mail went out looking for help, but not with a lot of optimism. This was a big-ticket item. But a church group in Mesa knew about a nursing home where two patients had died.

Each had an electric wheelchair. Neither had family. The wheelchairs were sitting in a closet gathering dust.

Eldridge picked up one of the wheelchairs and drove it to the homeless shelter. She said it reminded her of when her dad drove home with a new car. Everybody came out to see the new wheelchair.

The recipient cried. Eldridge cried. The people who worked at the shelter cried. Some of the other homeless people cried. It was a good day.

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