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Phone number gives homeless a line to the work world

People being helped by local service agencies can get a free, personal voice mailbox.

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Lynne Johnston wants a job.

The 46-year-old Austin woman, who is homeless and lives at the Salvation Army shelter, says she'll do anything: typing, landscaping, cashier work. But she can't get a job without a phone number.

Now she has one.

Johnston is among 1,200 people in the area using Community Voice Mail. This branch of the national program, launched in March by the Austin Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center, allows clients of local social service agencies to access a personal voice mailbox for free.

"I really needed it," Johnston said. "I give this number out to everybody and anybody who needs it."

The service gives people a reliable phone number to put on job, housing and benefits applications, program coordinator Teresa Jedinak said. It also lets them stay in touch with family and friends.

"There are a lot of people who want to reclaim stability in their lives and do good, and they don't have a phone number to help them do that," Jedinak said.

Community Voice Mail came to Austin earlier this year after Impact Austin, a local grant-giving group, gave the center more than \$100,000 for the project.

The program does not give people phones. Instead, it loans them a voice mailbox through which they retrieve messages. That mailbox can be accessed by dialing in from any telephone.

Clients use the mailbox for an average of seven months, according to national statistics.

Caseworkers determine on a case-by-case basis when users no longer need to be in the program. The number is then assigned to a new client.

Supporters estimate that it will cost \$50,000 a year to keep the program running. That money will be spent on a part-time employee to coordinate the program, along with the monthly fees associated with the system.

The additional funding will come from foundations and private donations, MHMR spokeswoman Beverly Scarborough said.

Community Voice Mail, based in Seattle, began there in 1991. Caseworkers had seen needy people miss their chance at jobs or housing because they could not be reached.

Community activists developed the voice mail system as a way to help people get back on their feet, said Jennifer Brandon, Community Voice Mail's executive director.

"The vision is to give people a personal, private phone number that they can use to solve all kinds of problems," Brandon said.

The idea took off.

In 2005, Community Voice Mail served 46,000 people in 37 cities. The nonprofit group hopes to expand to the nation's 50 largest cities by 2008.

Since its creation, the program has helped about 500,000 people, Brandon said.

"It lets you have your dignity," she said. "People say, 'This makes me feel human again.' "

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