

Local group formed to fill growing need

BY CHARLOTTE TWINE

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TAVERNIER — Pastor Kerby Avedovech of Coral Isles Church keeps a letter on her desk as a reminder. She read the contents aloud at the most recent meeting of the Upper Keys Community Resource Council at the church on May 26.

It was from a woman in the area who wanted to thank the group for helping her make a deposit to set up electricity in her apartment. She had been out of work due to an injury and had been living in her car. She said that she had been afraid that she was going to die in her car.

"This was \$200, and it helped her move forward with her life," said Avedovech to the gathering of about 14 members. "It reminds me of why we do what we're doing."

Avedovech and Patrice Schwermer are the current co-chairs of the Community Resource Council, which was formed in January 2015. Schwermer is the Catholic Charities outreach coordinator

for Monroe Ministries. She told the Free Press that local religious and non-profit organizations were starting to notice that struggling families were coming to them individually and asking for help with such needs as making a security deposit on housing, paying a utility bill, filling a prescription, getting food or even taking a shower.

"For a long time these entities have been operating by themselves to meet the need as it arrives," Schwermer said. "A family might come to a church and say, 'I can't pay my electric bill,' and that community would try to help. But there has been more and more situations, and there hasn't been a good way to collaborate and meet all these needs."

Schwermer explained that while one church may have the funds for bus passes, another would have gift cards for the grocery store, and it was a struggle for one organization to meet all the needs that a family may have. She noted that Key West has a more fully developed network to guide people in times of trouble,

with organizations such as the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition and Catholic Charities leading the way.

"Through these agencies, there's a continuum of care," she said. "They work well together."

Thus the Community Resource Council was born to create a network that provides a continuum of care in the Upper Keys. And it's not to be confused with an organization with a similar-sounding name, Community Health Ministries in the Upper Keys, which is run through Mariners Hospital in Tavernier and provides aid such as food and transportation.

The Community Resource Council is still finding its feet, having just met for a retreat to discuss creating a leadership structure and hammer out a mission statement: "The UKCRC is a collaborative network of caring partners working together to share resources and empower people to meet their basic needs and build a sustainable community."

Avedovech pointed out a crucial difference between Key West and

the Upper Keys: Key West organizations often have to try to provide shelter "but here it's making ends meet," she said. "It's a different need."

Current members of the Community Resource Council include representatives from the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition; many area churches such as San Pedro Catholic, St. Justin the Martyr Catholic, St. James the Fisherman Episcopal, Key Largo Baptist, Immanuel Lutheran, Bluewater in the Keys and Coral Isles; the Keys Jewish Community Center; Habitat for Humanity; The Long Walk Home; Key Largo and Islamorada chambers of commerce; United Way; and the Guidance/Care-Center.

Stephanie Kaple is the chief operating officer of the Florida Keys Outreach Coalition and currently serves as the Community Resource Council's secretary. The coalition itself recognized a growing need in the Upper Keys and established an office in Tavernier last fall. She explained that different members of the Community Resource

Council, including Coral Isles and The Long Walk Home, were able to "cobble together" what the woman living in a car needed to turn her electricity on.

"That's what the UKCRC should be: a collective to help people through the system," Kaple said.

For now, the Community Resource Council is growing its membership base and meeting monthly at Coral Isles. On May 26, members discussed the possibility of hiring a social worker in the future and a recent victory: The Florida Keys Outreach Coalition's outreach worker, Julie DuVall, drove a homeless woman who had recently lost her photo ID to get it replaced.

"We can make a huge difference with not a lot of money," DuVall said.

The next meeting of the Upper Keys Community Resource Council will be on June 23 at Coral Isles Church, 90001 Overseas Highway. The public is welcome to attend. For more information, email upperkeyscrc@gmail.com or go to facebook.com/ukcrc.

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