

Published: 08.20.2009

Neighbors find a way to help homeless veterans

By Lourdes Medrano

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Homeless veterans roaming the Tucson area wear out their shoes quickly, and replacements are hard to come by when money is scarce.

Enter a group of Oro Valley retirees with a soft spot for those who have served in the armed forces. In less than a week, Julia Zhan and her neighbors collected more than 170 sneakers, boots and sandals for homeless veterans.

"Our goal was to see if we could get 100 pairs of shoes," Zhan said recently. "We got a lot more than that, with more coming."

The shoes will be given to homeless veterans who stop by the VA hospital on South Sixth Avenue for services offered there, said Marty Twohill, clinical director for rehabilitation programs.

Shoes are always in short supply, so the Oro Valley donations provide a much-needed boost, he said.

"They allow us to extend our services," Twohill said.

Zhan, with some help from her husband Tom, kicked off the shoe drive after hearing about needy veterans from a fellow resident of Splendido, a retirement community on North Rancho Vistoso.

Her neighbor was donating clothes to the VA hospital when he encountered a homeless, shoeless man with blisters on his feet. Hearing that story moved Zhan to action.

"It seems that a lot of people donate clothing but not many donate shoes and socks," she said.

She made flyers asking for donations and set up boxes in Splendido's business center. Her neighbors, many of them veterans or widows of military men, were quick to respond.

Martha Mary Archer, 84, was one of them.

"It's for a very fine cause," Archer said. She donated about two dozen pairs of new and used shoes that belonged to her late husband, David Archer. The Army veteran died in March.

June Slemtz, 86, donated 10 pairs of her late husband's shoes. An Air Force veteran, George Slemtz died in May.

Helping out veterans in need is important, she said.

"They fought for us, they put themselves on the line," Slemtz said. "It's the least we can do for them."

The husbands' shoes added to growing stacks. Socks and duffel bags also were dropped off. Word of the shoe drive spread and Miller's Surplus donated several dozen work boots.

The response seemed to surprise even Zhan, who said her neighbors have displayed their generosity in other worthy causes.

"This is a very compassionate group of people," she said.

• Contact reporter Lourdes Medrano at 618-1924 or Imedrano@azstarnet.com.