

An Arlington nonprofit helps families struggling to afford rent, utilities during the holiday season

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Tillie Burgin, Mission Arlington executive director, stands in front of one of the group's two Christmas Store rooms in downtown Arlington.

Tillie Burgin founded Mission Arlington in 1986. The group grew from a bible study on Sundays to a one-stop shop for clothes, medical care and housing aid for Arlington families in need.

KERA spoke with Burgin about the group's annual Christmas Store, as well as Mission Arlington's growth into a local institution.

Mission Arlington's Christmas Store origins

- Tillie Burgin: "The Christmas store concept began when in 1986, '87, and we were working with people, trying to help people. People started saying to me, 'We need help with our electric bill, we need help with our rent money.' 'Well what happened?' 'Well, we used our rent money to buy toys for our kids.' And so we said, 'Well, don't do that. Let us help with toys and turkeys and Christmas trees and hold on to your rent money, hold onto your utility money.'"
- "As God has continued to direct us, people have learned how to manage. We're preventing homelessness. We're pleased with that. Plus, everybody gets to hear the Christmas story and, of course, that's God's gift to us, so there's a sense of people finding hope and significance and it brings joy to the city and to the world."

Christmas store eligibility

- "If they have children, they are qualified to come. And we make things work, regardless of circumstances and situations. A lady came a couple days ago, and she just buried her son. She said, 'I know I should come for toys, but I came for prayer.' Today, she's volunteering with us and just trying to help her be OK in this crisis time. She didn't need toys. She needed fellowship, she needed relationships, she needed a touch from God."

How many families served

- "I can tell you we fed 6,000 families at Thanksgiving. Last year we gave 36,000 children toys. We would spend all of our time counting."
- "We just pray that as people recognize that numbers mean people and those people are significant. The more that would keep coming, we want them. There's a sign at the office that says, 'Please come back' because a lot of the folks that come back are volunteering now because they know what it meant to get the help."
- "A lot more people have needed services and I will tell you that during the COVID days, we never shut down. These doors never closed. We beefed up everything we could beef up from inside to outside and of course volunteers were not like they had been. And so that meant our staff which was small in numbers but we all just jumped in together so that folks could not have to come in keep in their cars, take care of them. Our medical clinic was beyond super."

How to get involved

“All you have to do is show up. A fella came today he said, ‘I know you are busy, you have a lot of people here. What can I do?’ I saw a truck, our truck had Christmas trees on it. I said, ‘If you’ll jump up in that truck and start handing out Christmas trees to people.’ He’s still doing it. There’s always a place for people. Bring your children. The family coming together to volunteer is huge.”

On Mission Arlington's growth

“We started a bible study in an apartment at 11 o’ clock on Sunday morning and I thought, ‘Well, this is neat.’ And then, God began to grow it, and it has continued to grow. There has never been a plan, there has never been a committee meeting, there has never been a survey. When God launched, he launched.”

Got a tip? Email Kailey Broussard at kbroussard@kera.org. You can follow Kailey on Twitter [@KaileyBroussard](https://twitter.com/KaileyBroussard).