Care Fair spotlights service groups

By ROD DREHER
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Nearly 80 area community service organizations showcased their efforts Saturday to make Baton Rouge a kinder, gentler place in which to live.

The city’s first Care Fair brought exhibits sponsored by church groups, United Way agencies, private civic groups and local government agencies to Cortana Mall with the mission of educating the public about human services available for the needy.

Care Fair also served to bring attention to problems in the community that might have gone unnoticed by some people.

Problems like AIDS. Lori LeBlanc, director of Friends for Life (formerly the Baton Rouge AIDS Task Force), said most people believe Baton Rouge doesn’t have much of a problem with AIDS.

In fact, LeBlanc said, there are 104 people in the Baton Rouge area suffering from the virus, about 20 percent of which are children under 13.

LeBlanc said she became involved with Friends for Life because she believed it was time for the heterosexual community to quit ignoring the problem. “It’s not just a gay disease,” she said.

Friends for Life relies on volunteers, which include physicians, social workers and mental health professionals, to make educational presentations throughout Baton Rouge in an effort to dispel AIDS myths and let people know how they can protect themselves from the deadly disease.

Further down the mall, volunteers from the Greater Baton Rouge Area Food Bank were handing out pamphlets and brochures about the hunger problem in this area. Food Bank executive director Carl Stages said that though most locals have heard of the Food Bank, they don’t realize the scope of the hunger problem here.

“It’s not just in New York or California. It’s right here in our own hometown,” Stages said.

The Food Bank feeds an estimated 2,000 people daily through 108 member agencies in a nine-parish area, Stages said. Those who rely on the Food Bank for nourishment are not what most people would expect, he said.

“It’s not your stereotypical poor person. It’s your person who’s been unemployed for a long time. It’s your senior citizen who doesn’t make enough from his pension and retirement benefits to make ends meet. These kinds of people have nowhere to turn but to the Food Bank,” Stages said.

Other organizations who sponsored displays at Saturday’s exhibit ranged from high-profile agencies, like the Salvation Army, to lesser known social service providers, such as the Delta Haven Youth Club, where young people can relax in an alcohol-free and drug-free atmosphere.

Care Fair coordinator Kim Knighten sees the event as the promise of a better future for the city. “By presenting these agencies, we offer our resources as tangible proof that we believe in Baton Rouge,” she said.

The Care Fair was organized by the city-parish and a cross section of private and church groups. Mayor Tom McDuff said it fits into the mission of city-parish service to the needy.

“We are shifting, and in some cases, expanding our dimensions to help individuals beyond their immediate crises,” McDuff said. “We want to help in the development of the whole individual. Care Fair will help citizens find resources.”