

Helping the homeless

Sue Sonnenberg took the job on herself and wants to expand.

By **ERIKA M. TORRES**
STAFF WRITER

Sue Sonnenberg has helped clothe homeless people in Santa Ana for the past four years. Now she has her sight set on Tustin.

Sonnenberg, an Irvine resident, decided to donate clothing after volunteering at a thrift store and seeing clothing be thrown away after going unpurchased. One day, she accompanied a regular customer who would purchase clothes and then drop them off near the Santa Ana Civic Center.

"I was mortified by how people took the clothes dumped on the ground and fought over them," Sonnenberg said. "I had no idea what I was going to do I just knew I couldn't stand seeing these people act like animals."

Sonnenberg began taking the leftover thrift store clothes and started organizing them by size in her 1,000-square-foot condo.

Two years ago, she retired from her job in accounting to devote herself full time to the cause. Her community church, Creekside Christian Fellowship in Irvine, pays for the six storage units used to store the clothing Sonnenberg regularly



MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

MARIANN CHAVEZ, foreground, and Jean Olivares, both of Mission Viejo, measure pants to make sure sizes are accurate.

collects from three thrift stores. She has about 40 volunteers from her church, Mariners Church and Saddleback Church.

On Saturday, Sonnenberg and her team of volunteers went to Santa Ana Civic Center to distribute clothing, although they also visit the Salvation Army, the Mental Health Association and the Santa Ana Armory.

"She's a real sweetheart; she helps a lot of people," James Sagapolutele, 47, said. He became homeless four years ago after a divorce and relies on the clothing Sonnenberg donates. "She does things for everybody, not just physically, but emotionally."

Sonnenberg says the clothes not only help people get through cold nights but it also

helps them get jobs and improves their self-esteem.

"They come back and tell you how it changed their life," she said. "The main thing this does for them is show them that someone cares."

Jim Hurst, who started volunteering with Sonnenberg three years ago, said it has been Sonnenberg's longtime dream to expand the charity to Tustin.

Sonnenberg hopes to find churches in Tustin that would sort through the clothes and give them to city residents in need.

"I would love to find a church in Tustin that could distribute clothes," she said.

Interested persons or churches can contact Sue Sonnenberg at s.sonnenberg@cox.net.