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Volunteer group links Herndon and Sterling residents

By Whitney Von Lake Hopler, Times Staff Writer
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The increasing affluence in the Herndon and Sterling areas is as bright and bold as sunlight shining on a new glass office building.

While the bustling high-tech industry and a surge of population growth has created a gleaming picture on the surface, some area residents fall through the economic cracks.

But there is a safety net to catch them.

LINK Inc.--an all-volunteer organization including 17 churches in Herndon and Sterling--has been operating since 1972, providing emergency food, furniture and financial assistance to residents in need in these two communities that straddle the borders of Fairfax and Loudoun counties.

A Herndon resident, who asked that her name not be used, saw her family's income abruptly stop after her husband was injured and disabled in 1993.

After years of staying home to raise her four children--now all teens--the resident was forced to enter the job market when her husband could no longer work.

The emergency food LINK provided to the family during that transition meant a lot, said the resident, who now runs a day-care business from her home.

"It helped us out so much," she said. "My kids were very embarrassed about accepting help, but they discovered how caring people can be when LINK helped us."

No one is incapable of experiencing similar financial need at some point in life, the resident said. "You ever find yourself in the situation once, it really raises your awareness that it can happen to anyone," she said.

"I think a lot of people think they're immune to these types of situations of financial hardship. A lot of times a good bank account or a pretty home make you think you can never have anything bad happen to lose them, but sometimes all it takes is a long-term illness or some other crisis, and you're in trouble."

Cari, a Sterling resident who asked that her last name be withheld, saw the glass of her stable suburban life shatter when her husband of 10 years left her and their two children around January 1999.

Although Cari had a full-time job, her salary alone wasn't enough to support herself, her children and her disabled father, who also lived with the family.

"The oil company had cut off our oil for late payment and it was cold outside, it was winter. I almost lost my home; I almost lost my car. It was horrible. Our food had almost run out and, with all the bills, I didn't know what I was going to do about buying enough for all of us, but LINK came through with a whole week's worth of groceries when we needed them and helped us several more times as much as we needed while going through that rough time."

Now both Cari and the Herndon resident volunteer through LINK, helping others in need of emergency food.

"Because I've been there, I know what it's like to be humbled by asking for help," said Cari, who talks by phone with people requesting help to arrange the logistics of getting food to them.

"There's pride that you need to overcome [when asking for help], and it's hard. I've cried with people, and I've had them call back later just to talk. It's a privilege to be able to comfort and encourage people. After I talk to people, I always pray for them, too. I know many people have been praying for me, and spiritually I feel God's peace even though I'm going through a turbulent time right now."

The directness of LINK's ministry makes volunteering with the organization rewarding, Cari said.

"LINK shows you almost immediately how one person can make a real difference in someone else's life."

Helping people at their point of need gives a volunteer a healthy wake-up call, said Herndon resident Carol Lavery, who has been volunteering through LINK for eight years.

"It's such a hands-on way to help people," she said. "In Northern Virginia, it's such a rat race that you can get caught up in the day-to-day and start to feel like your life doesn't have much meaning. And you're not very aware that there are people with needs in this area because what you see is the affluence.

"When you meet people in need, though, and are able to help them, it's like a reality check that brings meaning into your life," Lavery said. As its name implies, LINK is meant to link people together in a community of caring, said Joy Trickett, the organization's acting president.

Herndon and Sterling's recent dramatic growth has eroded some of the communities' previous neighborly atmospheres, she said.

"Our hometown feel has kind of gone from this area," said Trickett, who grew up in Herndon. "We don't know our neighbors as well anymore because of all the rapid growth."

Making the time to volunteer will come naturally after trying it, said Herndon resident Linda Tacc who has volunteered through LINK since 1984.

"Everybody is so busy, but the needs [in the community] are real and have to be met. You may think you don't have time to volunteer, but once you actually start doing it, you discover that it's a pleasurable experience and you'll want to keep on doing it," she said.

The efforts of LINK's volunteers are blessed, Lavery said. "You know it's God at work because from a worldly point of view, it [LINK] shouldn't be working," she said. "We have no paid staff, and we don't have an office or even a very efficient computerized system to work with. But we're able help everyone who comes to us in significant ways."

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