

A different approach to helping those in need

By Barbara Curtin

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It was the jelly beans that made Tammy Watt's day.

The Salem woman needed to make an Easter basket for her 8-year-old daughter, and at the Hope Station warehouse, she got to "shop" for her groceries instead of being handed an emergency food box full of items that a stranger had chosen. Among her five cloth bags of mostly nutritious stuff, Watt had stashed a bag of jellybeans.

She liked another thing about this nonprofit organization as well: The food, the two plastic bags of clothing and the bag full of paper products she picked up Wednesday weren't charity. She'd paid \$25 per month for the privilege of shopping with Hope Station Community Services Inc.

"It's a hand up, not a handout," she said, as she and a volunteer left to transfer the supplies from her shopping cart to her car.

That's an important distinction for Watt, who supports her unemployed partner and her daughter. She gets a check from Senior and Disabled Services because she is a care provider for her mother, who has lupus, and her brother, who is a quadriplegic. Family finances are so close to the edge, she said, that it caused a crisis when her brother was hospitalized for few days and the state stopped her caregiver payments.

Marci Mattoso, the president and CEO of Hope Station, said the nonprofit exists for people in this kind of fix — the working poor who aren't eligible for government help but who don't earn enough to scrape by.

The organization is serving 30 families now; Mattoso would like to take on 20 more.

By requesting \$25 plus two hours' volunteer work per month, Hope Station gives the families dignity, Mattoso said.

In return, the "benefit partners" get to shop twice a month for food, clothing and personal items. They also get haircuts and eye exams donated by members of the First Church of the Nazarene, which has nurtured the fledgling nonprofit from idea to reality.

"It's a different philosophy than just being given something," Mattoso said.



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Tammy Watt shops at the Hope Station Community Services Inc. warehouse. The program provides food, clothing and other services for the working poor.

At a glance

WHAT: Hope Station Community Services Inc., a faith-based organization that provides food, clothing, counseling, haircuts and eye checkups to low-income workers who do not receive government assistance in exchange for \$25 and two volunteer hours a month.

HOW TO HELP: The organization needs businesses and individuals willing to donate food, goods, time and money.

TO LEARN MORE: Call Nancy Taylor, (503) 581-3680 to inquire about volunteering or to request services.

Families also can get counseling — Mattoso is a family therapist, and she said that stress from hard times often strains family relationships.

Hope Station also helps participants learn to manage their finances and to start paying off debts, she said. Success will be measured by such goals as catching up on back taxes and paying off credit cards.

So far, most participants have learned about the program through Mattoso's outreach to churches and through word of mouth. She may ask other social service agencies to refer families as well.

"They can be Christians, they can be atheists, I don't care, so long as they are working people who aren't making it," she said.

Mattoso got the idea for the program while studying nonprofit management at Portland State University. She served an internship at Birch Community Services in Gresham and was struck by its effectiveness. She persuaded Pastor Dave McGarrah of First Nazarene to help try to replicate the idea in Salem, and she spent most of last year getting it off the ground.

Hope Station now is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization separate from the church. It has already outgrown its first warehouse, 1,500 square feet in the basement of Elsinore Fine Framing & Art. It is preparing to move into a 4,000-square-foot facility with parking and bathrooms in southeast Salem.

"I prayed, and God gave us a place," Mattoso said.

First Nazarene's congregation has been generous with support and volunteer power. Elsinore Framing owner Steve Narkaus has contributed more than 15,000 cans of food so far by offering customers a discount in return for food. The discount offer originally was to last through March, but it has been extended through May.

His wife, Barb, serves on Hope Station's board, and the couple has offered the use of 1 acre of their land for a Hope Station community garden.

"I especially liked it because these families are not sitting and asking for a handout," Narkaus said. "These are families that are working, they are in need, trying to make it on minimum wage. They are a very deserving group."

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