

People in suburbs feeling the poverty pinch, too

By Jim Woods *THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH*

These have been trying times for Cindy Gallimore.

She has taken in her mother, who has cancer. She recently lost her job as a legal assistant for a law firm. Her family, including her husband and two children, is feeling the financial squeeze.

Gallimore, 48, turned to her priest for counsel. He sent her to the Westerville Area Resource Ministry, where she filled a cart with groceries on a recent frigid morning.

The Brookings Institution, a research group in Washington, D.C., recently reported that more suburban dwellers, such as Gallimore, are facing financial challenges as the poverty rate rises. However, the services to help them have not made the move to the suburbs.

The institution's study, *Two Steps Back: City and Suburban Poverty Trends 1999-2005*, found that social-service providers are disproportionately located in central-city neighborhoods.

The Westerville ministry, known as WARM, started years ago as churches and community members responded to needs.

"The faith community in Franklin County has always stepped up to provide social services," said Marilee Chinnici-Zuercher, president of FirstLink, a nonprofit service in Franklin County that refers people to agencies such as WARM.

She said a number of church pantries serve suburban areas. However, the Westerville ministry has expanded beyond food baskets to link clients to job services and other counseling.

Westerville appears to be a comfortable, picturesque suburb. The 2000 U.S. Census found the median household income was \$69,135.

But WARM has never been busier. The ministry served 2,033 families last year, a 33 percent increase over the previous year, said Scott Marier, the executive director.

The ministry serves the 52 square miles of the Westerville school district, which includes Columbus neighborhoods as far south as Morse Road. One-fifth of the district's students qualify for free or reduced lunches.

The ministry started in the late 1960s with a food pantry in the basement of St. Paul Catholic Church. Other Westerville churches also recognized the increasing need, funneling donations to St. Paul's pantry.

WARM, located in the renovated offices of a factory at 175 E. Broadway Ave., has a \$325,000 annual budget that supports two full-time and seven part-time staff members. Scores of volunteers make it work, Marier said.

Judy Voll, coordinator of client services, said the ministry initially focused on distributing food and clothing.

Now, she said, the ministry also tries to deal with the root cause of a client's troubles. It offers an array of educational services, budgeting classes, job-placement services, professional-help referrals and spiritual support.

Clients tend to be people caught in a generational cycle of poverty, those facing situational financial pressures, or senior citizens and the disabled.

Heather Beynen, 34, was facing some financial struggles a couple of years ago. The single mother of four is working full time while studying for a nursing degree.

She called FirstLink, which referred her to WARM.

"I was expecting a one-time grocery thing, but it turned out to be a little more than that," Beynen said.

She went through a budgeting class, and a mentor, who is a nurse, talks to her about school.

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