

Group offers bus ticket back home

When Charlotte's image as a recession-proof city fails to pan out, volunteers help the stranded get tickets to leave.

By Mark Price

msprice@charlotteobserver.com

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Crystal Allen moved to Charlotte in March, dreaming of a job and a better life.

Today, the Army vet and her 5-year-old son will be heading back to Kansas on a Greyhound, yet another among the hundreds who mistakenly thought Charlotte had been spared the worst of the recession.

“People kept saying, ‘Wait it out. It will get better.’ But it never did,” says Allen, 33, who was laid off last fall from her job in Wichita. “The funny thing is, all the people who told me to wait weren’t from here. Everybody I met was from someplace else.”

Like Allen, many end up on the doorstep of one of Charlotte's least known nonprofits, the Travelers Aid Society.

Last year, it helped 681 stranded travelers, most of whom came for jobs that either didn't last or never materialized. The program expects that number to rise in the months ahead, said Floyd Davis, whose role as president of Community Link includes directing Travelers Aid.

“For quite some time, Charlotte was known as the land of opportunity, a place where you could get work and the housing was reasonably priced,” said Davis. “We had people moving here who didn't have a lot of means, and when things didn't work out, they exhausted what little resources they had. As the economy improves, I think we'll see a lot more coming here with the same hopes and dreams.”

Travelers Aid, which is the only agency of its type in the Carolinas, also helps people with medical emergencies, women who are escaping domestic abuse, and travelers whose vehicle broke down. To qualify, they must show proof that family or friends elsewhere are waiting to take them in. Once that is established, they get a bus ticket back home.

Allen learned of the program at a time when her situation had gone from bad to worse. She had been a resident of the city's Hall House shelter for women and children, until it closed in June. Since then, she has depended on the kindness of friends for a place to stay.

“I decided about the time school started that it was time to go back home,” said Allen. “But I still needed a job to have money for a bus ticket. If it wasn't for Travelers Aid, who knows how long I'd be waiting?”

In some cases, Travelers Aid has actually rescued families sleeping for days at the bus station. Such a case arose Thursday, when police alerted the agency to four folks from the Midwest, including an 18-month-old, who were “lured” to Charlotte by the promise of sales jobs that included room and board.

“They were given \$7 a day for food, placed in a hotel and only earned \$4 for every \$40 they made in sales,” said Davis. “Obviously, they couldn't live on that, so they were dropped off at the bus station and told tickets would be at the counter.”

The four were still waiting nearly three days later when Travelers Aid stepped in with bus fair.

Last year, the program spent \$40,000 on such travel arrangements. The prospect of spending more comes at a time when Travelers Aid, like other United Way charities, is facing budget cuts.

However, Davis recently came up with simple solution: The program is now run completely by volunteers, which is saving Community Link about \$93,600 annually. The savings are being redirected to programs that help get the working poor out of shelters and into affordable housing.

Wanda Baker of Charlotte is among the volunteers who have taken over the program. She's 59, retired from AT&T and was looking for a way to help out “besides giving money.” She started Aug. 1 and has since helped about 25 people, including a couple of women tossed out by boyfriends and a man who got out of rehab to learn his wife had given up their home and moved to another city.

“I've talked to these young women with children who came determined to make it, and discovered they had no one to turn to,” said Baker. “It touches my heart to the point that I just want to hug them. If it weren't for this program, my only guess is they'd be on the streets of Charlotte.”