



Bridging the gap

Nonprofit expanding presence

By Josh McCann

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Bridgett Baker

CONCORD - Floyd R. Davis Jr. has a vision of eliminating homelessness across the 16-county Charlotte region. Soon, he'll have a place to work from in Cabarrus County.

Davis, president and CEO of Community Link, says his Charlotte-based nonprofit is in the "very final stages" of opening an office off Copperfield Boulevard. By Aug. 1, he will base four social workers there, with another four expected within a year.

Armed with funds of \$238,000 from a two-year HUD grant and \$156,000 in state funds, Davis is eager to get down to the business of making a difference.

"Our purpose is to enable working poor individuals and families to obtain and sustain safe, decent and affordable housing," he says. "It does no good to put people in the housing and have them faced with foreclosure or eviction."

While Community Link workers have been operating in Cabarrus for 14 years, they have always done so out of the Charlotte headquarters.

Having a home base in the area, Suite 206 at 300 Copperfield Blvd., will better equip Community Link to serve its clients' needs, Davis said.

"With our space, this allows us to create a physical presence in Cabarrus County, and we are delighted to be able to do that," Davis said. "We like for 80 percent of our work to be done in homes, because we know transportation is an issue for working poor people."

If his plans unfold successfully, Davis said his organization will establish itself as a permanent fixture that will work with other nonprofits.

Community Link's role in that partnership will begin once clients are referred from the nine homeless shelters in the surrounding area, along with the Department of Social Services and other agencies.

For up to two years, clients will receive rent subsidies as needed while learning about budgeting, tenant rights, household structure and neighborhood communication, said Kenyatta Wheeler, program manager for the new office.

Training people to break the cycle of poverty is not only the right thing to do, Davis said, it's also in the public's economic best interest.

Citing a 2005 study of Department of Labor statistics, Davis said about 35 percent of the more

than 800,000 jobs in the 16-county greater Charlotte region offer wages of less than \$12 per hour, the threshold for working poor. Between now and 2012, he added, seven of 10 jobs created will fall into that category.

That trend has major implications for the region, Davis said, since that puts many essential jobs - including some police, fire fighting and teaching positions - on the verge of falling behind the necessary living wage.

"We need these folks in order for our community to be able to continue to function," Davis said.

To secure its HUD grant, Community Link had to first demonstrate that it was part of a broad coalition of groups cooperating together to pool resources and expertise, he said.

To meet that aim, Community Link will continue to participate in the Piedmont Continuum of Care, an assortment of projects dedicated to developing a seamless system to solve socioeconomic problems across Cabarrus, Stanly, Rowan, Union and Davidson counties.

Taking such a collective approach makes sense, Davis said, since "our problems and issues don't stop at political boundaries."

"It's a wonderful collaboration of organizations coming together to address a community issue," Davis said. "That's what it takes today in order to be successful."

Ed Hosack, executive director of Cooperative Christian Ministry, called Community Link's increased presence a "tremendous addition" to the area's array of social service organizations. Previously, his organization teamed with Community Link to employ a single social worker at CCM's night shelter to handle both short-term and long-term needs, he said. Now, CCM will be able to focus primarily on resolving crisis situations while Davis, Wheeler and company can serve as a "bridge" to independence.

The need for assistance with that final step is crucial, Hosack said, since the county has a shortage of affordable housing and an absence of transitional housing.

But Community Link is developing relationships with local landlords willing to help, Wheeler said.

So even though all involved acknowledge that the task before them is daunting, Hosack said Community Link's growth will help ensure that others' efforts are providing more than a "Band-Aid."

"It's one more resource for all the other organizations in the community to turn to," he said. "Their interest and their activities will actually result in new opportunities."

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Community Link

To reach a trained social worker at Community Link, call 704-943-9509

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