

Nonprofit Driven To Aid Needy

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Jarret Roche, a mechanic with Layman's Automotive and Towing Service, replaces the brake vacuum booster on Gotto Sahani's 1988 station wagon on Friday afternoon. Way to Go, a United Way partner agency, helps needy people such as Sahani get, and keep, reliable transportation.

Photo by Michael Reilly

Editor's Note: This is the fourth story in a seven-week series highlighting the local agencies supported by the United Way of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. The United Way is in the midst of its annual Community Impact Campaign, which helps fund 30 of these non-profit agencies from throughout the Central Valley. Each week, a different nonprofit will be profiled, along with the services it provides to those in need.

HARRISONBURG - Although Gotto Sahani and his family are enjoying a much happier and safer life here than they were in Iraq, that doesn't mean starting over in a new country was easy. Far from it.

Back in 2000, Sahani was working in his home country as an assistant electronic engineer at a government-run broadcasting station, fixing transmitters. But as a Kurd and a Christian, Sahani found Iraq an increasingly dangerous place to live.

"At one point, we crossed the border into Syria," said Sahani, 46, who speaks "British-style" English with a Middle Eastern accent because he learned the language by listening to the BBC. "Later, we came to the United States as refugees."

Life in Harrisonburg isn't easy. Sahani's hodge-podge accent is difficult for some people to understand. His wife is ill and can't work. His son is taking classes at Blue Ridge Community College but can't find a job.

And then, in April it got worse. The family car - a 1988 Honda Accord - finally died. Sahani took the bus or cabs to work when he could afford it. Sometimes his boss picked him up. But that couldn't go on forever, he said.

"I was afraid to lose my job," said Sahani, a janitor at Asbury Methodist Church. "I needed independent driving."

Fortunately for Sahani, help arrived a few months later. In November, he received a 1988 Volvo station wagon from a local nonprofit called Way To Go. On Friday, the group paid to fix the car's brakes.

"I can go to work and to the grocery store," Sahani said. "I'm very happy."

Way To Go

Founded in 2005, Way To Go helps low-income working families with transportation. The agency solicits used cars and pays for insurance, license plates, city stickers and repairs - anything for folks to get, and keep, reliable transportation to and from work.

Way To Go is one of 30 partner agencies of the Harrisonburg and Rockingham County United Way. Of the group's \$95,000 budget, about \$7,800 comes from the United Way.

The remainder of Way To Go's funding comes from grants and donations, said Betty Newell, a Massanutten resident who is the agency's program coordinator. More than half of the company's budget - about \$55,000 - goes toward repairs. The agency has no paid staff.

"We buy a lot of tires. We fix a lot of windshields and brakes," Newell said.

In 2008, the agency helped 168 clients get back on the road by giving away nine cars, making 46 insurance payments, buying 38 tags or decals and providing taxi vouchers, gas vouchers, a car seat and a motorcycle helmet.

"We do whatever it takes to keep them mobile," Newell said.

Criteria

To receive help from Way To Go, applicants must be working and living in Harrisonburg or Rockingham County, Newell said. They also must be referred to the agency by a social worker, case manager or a worker at a service agency.

The waiting list for donated vehicles is about eight months. Way To Go is always accepting used cars and donations and hopes to be able to shorten that wait time.

"It makes a tremendous difference in someone's life and it's tax-deductible," Newell said of donations.

For Sahani, his Volvo came just in time.

"I'm really thankful for the help," he said.

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