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VEHICLES FOR CHANGE

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Car Program Offers Cheer To Residents Without Rides

Md.-Based Nonprofit Provides Many With Gift of Transportation

By [Michael Laris](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
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Steve Sullivan's cellphone kept ringing, and the mothers sitting around a table in Oakton were becoming unnerved. The engine light on the Oldsmobile had come on, pushing back work on the minivan.

"Ladies, I apologize. This day is just quickly going downhill," said Sullivan, who worked at an auto parts distributor before joining Vehicles for Change, a Halethorpe, Md., nonprofit agency that has provided 3,000 cars to low-income families since 1999.

The group receives donated cars, many a decade old and with more than 100,000 miles, fixes them up and works with social service agencies across Maryland and Virginia to find recipients, who pay about \$1,200 per car through a guaranteed loan program. The cars come with a six-month/6,000-mile warranty and a membership in AAA.

"Especially around the holidays, we try to get families in their cars if at all possible. We're a bit more *ambitious*," Sullivan said, searching for a word to explain the hiccups.

Many recipients, such as Tammy Caton, 21, are single parents. Caton relies on family to help her shuttle Anthony, 3, Sydney, 1, and baby Shyann to day care and to get to her cashier's job at Old Navy.

"Once I get my GED, I'll be able to go to Manassas and start my nursing school," said Caton, who went to the Northern Virginia Family Service offices Wednesday with her mother, Sherry.

Sullivan is an exacting Santa. Among his jobs: stressing the importance of timely payments and regular maintenance. Miss a payment without warning in the first two months, and "I'll pull the car. You're done," he said.

Caton said she is ready for the responsibility this time. Her last car was towed after she left it parked on the street on trash day, and she didn't have the money to get it back.

Shaquana Myers takes two buses to get her daughter to school and to reach her job in the baking department of a Bloom supermarket in Prince William County. Myers said her sister was cheated out of \$300 trying to buy car at an auction recently, and she wants better.

"I felt this route was more safe," Myers said.

Catherina Shahnazi was getting antsy Wednesday waiting for the repairs to her car to be finished. "My thing is, I work at the post office and it's Christmas. It's never-ending," said Shahnazi, who was born in Canada and grew up in Europe before settling in Leesburg.



Above, Shaquana Myers, left, of Woodbridge and Catherina Shahnazi of Leesburg talk with Steve Sullivan of Vehicles for Change, a group that fixes up donated cars and works with social service agencies across Maryland and Virginia to identify recipients. At left, Shahnazi, left, checks out her new car with Myers. (Photos By Kevin Clark -- The Washington Post)

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The average fair-market value of the cars is \$4,000, said Marty Schwartz, the group's president. The IRS has tightened rules on car donations, but an exception for such groups as Vehicles for Change allows donors to take a deduction for the full market value, he said.

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It costs Vehicles for Change an average of \$3,800 to get a donated car fixed up and to a family, he said. That's split among the group, the recipient and the sponsoring agency. Some higher-end cars are sold to raise money for the effort, he said. A survey of 155 recipients found that 70 percent had increased their wages after getting their cars and being able to drive farther or faster to better jobs, Schwartz said.

By Wednesday night, after delays that left Sullivan drained, Myers left the mechanic with her 1998 Oldsmobile Cutlass, and Shahnazi headed home in her white Buick LeSabre. Caton is

expecting her Voyager today. "He really wanted to get us out of there with good working cars," Shahnazi said.

Said Sullivan, "It's good to see the families once they're in their cars. They are buying into this. They've got a stake in this."

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