

## Congregations Unite with Interfaith Works

By Sharon Allen Gilder

Armed with a board of directors, a staff of 110 professionals, a corps of some 5,000 community volunteers, partnerships with other area charities, and more than 165 affiliated congregations of diverse faiths, Interfaith Works (IW) has made a difference for 20,000 Montgomery County residents below the federal poverty line each year. The 501(c)3 nonprofit, established in Rockville in 1972, mobilizes the resources of the county's faith communities to offer service, education, and advocacy that will help reduce poverty and homelessness in the county.

Interfaith Works communications manager Charlotte Garvey is "proud to work for an agency that has an immediate impact on all of our neighbors and treats them with great dignity and respect." She noted that rather than handouts, IW's programs are "committed to preventing people from sinking into poverty. We seek to stabilize and empower economically-vulnerable people so they can achieve their goals for a better life and lift themselves from poverty." She added that IW's congregational partners represent many faith traditions and the services they provide have no religious component.

Numerous programs have been established by IW to determine needs and to provide assistance, among them Lift, Project Inform, Interfaith Clothing Center, several shelters and housing programs, and a Friends in Action mentoring program. Last year, the charity's Vocational Services program "helped 146 under-employed and unemployed people find jobs, including people living in homeless shelters," Garvey said. "Each program assesses the client's needs and determines the best strategy for addressing those needs."

The greatest needs are as diverse as the county itself. Project Inform counselors identified food security, clothing, vocational services/job training, medical and mental health assistance, housing assistance, English literacy, general adult literacy, training for GED, and computer skills training as a "good measure of where the heaviest needs are," Garvey said.

During remarks at IW's Companies Caring Breakfast in April, IW CEO Shane Rock announced, "The need is great, and it's growing." He cited statistics from the 2014 U.S. Census Bureau that estimate that 71,635 people in Montgomery County households have incomes under the federal poverty line for their family sizes. "That's an increase of 2,259 people from the 2014 estimate," he said. "Thirty percent of those living in poverty are employed but are not earning enough to provide for their family's most basic needs. More than one-quarter of children in Montgomery County are growing up in poverty."



Shane Rock, CEO of Interfaith Works with student volunteer, Eric Leon with backpack school supplies distribution

IW's Clothing Center serves 13,000 people each year and accepts drop-off donations Tuesday through Saturday. Families and individuals that provide proof of being "income-qualified (in financial need) are welcome to shop once a month for free, filling a bag we provide with essentials," Garvey said.

IW's shelters are part of Montgomery County's Department of Health and Human Services Continuum of Care. IW works with the county and other homeless providers to offer coordinated entry into the homeless system. Individuals "generally need to start at the Montgomery County Crisis Center," Garvey said. "On any given night," Rock noted, "more than 300 people are staying in our shelter program and on any given night in Montgomery County, there are more than 1,000 people experiencing homelessness."

In an effort to make Montgomery County "the lowest poverty-rate county in the state," IW has set a goal to reduce poverty by twenty-five percent by its fiftieth anniversary in 2022, "to lift 17,380 impoverished neighbors out of poverty or approximately 2,900 people each year over the next six years," Rock said. "Our programs are all designed to serve as a catalyst to lift people out of poverty and bring them into stable, permanent housing."

"Volunteers are the heart of our organization," Garvey said. "While the core of our Vocational Services program is a skilled team of professionals, it wouldn't be as successful as it is without the contribution of volunteer mentors and coaches who work with our clients to prepare them to find new or better jobs." To volunteer, email [volunteer@iworksmc.org](mailto:volunteer@iworksmc.org).

In 2015, backpacks filled with school supplies were distributed to 2,500 children in need. The charity anticipates serving the same number of children for the 2016–2017 school year with the help of an open-to-the-public Ice Cream Social on Saturday, August 20, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., in the Park Potomac development (off Seven Locks and Montrose Roads). Bringing along donations of backpacks and supplies for IW's back-to-school drive will offer a "great opportunity for kids to help out other kids," Garvey said. Visit [www.iworksmc.org/school-supplies-drive](http://www.iworksmc.org/school-supplies-drive) for a list of needs.

IW will host its inaugural "Make Your Mark" 5K walk/run on Saturday, October 22, at its Clothing Center on Twinbrook Parkway in Rockville.

For information, visit [www.iworksmc.org](http://www.iworksmc.org).