



VERONICA WEBER

*Community Services Agency* volunteers Patricia Kassner, left, and Margaret Brooks fill baskets with fruit for their clients to pick up on Monday.

## The community's safety net

CSA OFFERS FREE HELP FOR THOUSANDS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS IN NEED

*By Kelly Truong*

**N**ine years ago, Carol Moreno sold her car for Christmas.

She had just suffered a severe back injury while lifting a patient at work, forcing her to give up her 10-year job as a hospice aide. With her sudden loss of income and medical problems holding her back, she saw no other way of



providing for her 13-year-old daughter and newborn son.

"I did what any parent would do," said Moreno, now 45 years old. "I sold my car,

tried to make things nicer for them. A parent will do what they have to do."

That same year, Moreno became a client at Mountain View's Community Services Agency, which provides crucial social services to residents in need. CSA has been at her side ever since, providing emergency assistance, food

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and nutrition services, and financial support.

"I thought I'd bite my pride," said Moreno. "I was really surprised how humane they made the process. They were very respectful."

This holiday season, she won't have to make the same sacrifices to provide gifts for her children. Her son, who turns nine two days before Christmas, will be one of the beneficiaries of CSA's Holiday Sharing program.

In addition its usual year-round assistance, CSA makes a special effort to bring the holidays to clients by setting up a makeshift toy store, in which families can shop for their children just as they would in a mall or department store.

"We convert the agency into a mini-department store," said Laura Schuster, director of nutrition and health education.

Funded by donations from the community, the holiday store carries toys, games, arts and crafts, books, pajamas, stuffed animals and stocking stuffers.

Case management director Elba Landaverde, who has worked at CSA for eight years, knows how tough the holidays are for the families she works with. "You hear really, really sad stories," she said. "A typical family is a mom, two to three kids, and a husband working for minimum wage."

The average monthly income for a CSA family is \$1,000, meaning that there is very little left after rent and utilities. "That's where we come in," Landaverde said.

One of the agency's most popular services is the Food and Nutrition Center, a mini-grocery store where clients can fill up on items such as bread, dairy products and produce. Between 100 and 200 people shop at the center every day.

"In some cases, they have to walk miles to get here because they can't even afford public transportation," Landaverde said.

CSA provides a number of other services, including nutrition education, dental services, insurance referrals and senior services. "It's kind of like a one-stop emergency assistance service," said associate director Maureen Wadiak.

The services continue to grow. When the agency held an Activities Week, the event was such a success that it expanded into a weekly class. Schuster now conducts a physical activities class for children every Thursday, teaching them how to stay healthy. "When they come, they get a prize," she said. "It's a lot of fun."

According to Wadiak, the agency saw an 18 percent increase in emergency assistance services during the 2006-07 fiscal year. This year, it expects an increase in job losses, a prediction corroborated by news from their clients: "They're telling us that they're getting their work hours reduced," she said.

Landaverde tries to keep up with news from her clients, learning their names and forging relationships with them. "We treat them with respect and dignity," she said.

Moreno agreed. "They're not treating me like Client No. 1, No. 2, No. 3," she said. "They don't put that stigmatization on you. A lot of times when you go to a social services program, people may assume you're there for a handout, but you're not. We're just here for help."



*Community Services Agency* volunteer Adela Di Canio stocks the shelves with donated desserts on Monday.

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