

CAC Helps Homeless Couple Get on Their Feet

Saying Sheldon and Vanessa Winters have had a rough last few months would be like saying the Arctic is a little bit cool. The Winters spent three months living in their 2001 Ford Econoline van.

“There were nights we couldn’t get warm,” said Sheldon of his homeless experience. “We would pray for sunny days.” The couple, who have been married for 24 years, faced other homeless challenges - staying clean, finding restrooms without looking like they were loitering, and locating secluded parking spots so they could change clothes.

But the biggest drawback to not having a safe, warm home is that Vanessa, who was diagnosed with renal failure in 2007 and has been receiving dialysis treatments since then, could not get a kidney transplant. She got cell phone calls five times that kidney matches had been found, and she turned down all five kidneys because she did not have the stable housing needed to heal and prevent her weakened immune system from picking up infections following surgery. “It would be selfish for me to take a kidney and not take care of it,” said Vanessa.

A combination of leaving their previous apartment in Arizona to come to Maryland to secure a place on the national waiting list for a kidney and displacement after the couple came to this state led to their homelessness.

Sheldon worked some of the time the Winters were homeless – he lost one job because he became ill and another because it was only temporary. The Winters collected her disability payments and his extended unemployment benefits, but that income barely covered the cost of gas, their van, vehicle insurance, cell phone, and other expenses they incurred while homeless.

One bright spot during their homeless period was the nutritional food from the Food Bank run by Community Action Council of Howard County, MD (CAC). “Without the Food Bank, I would have been undernourished. A dialysis patient has to have lots of protein. I could have gotten an infection if I had not eaten right,” said Vanessa. Sheldon added, “I was looking for work. Thanks to the Food Bank, I did not have hunger headaches on interviews.”

The break the couple needed to begin to get back on their feet came in February when CAC paid a \$195 outstanding electric bill and made a \$224 payment through the First Month’s Rent program for an apartment in Columbia.

Their apartment makes living healthy, independent lives more than a pipedream. The next time Sheldon goes on an employment interview, he and his clothes will be clean and he will have had a good night’s sleep. And the next time Vanessa gets a call that a kidney match has been found, she is more likely to be able to have the transplant. After

the transplant, there is the promise that Vanessa can work again. She has been a medical secretary and aspires to be a paralegal.

The Winters hope not only to become citizens who can pay their own bills, but to repay CAC for its help during their troubled times. “When we get back to work, we want to give time, money and food to the Food Bank,” stated Vanessa.