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Members of Volunteers for Change, plus people from Fairfax County's Coordinated Services Planning, help man the Britepaths donation table at Shoppers Food Warehouse. Directly behind the table are (from left) Sharon Bulova, Gerry Connolly, Scott Krinke and Christina Garris.



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Members of Volunteers for Change, plus people from Fairfax County's Coordinated Services Planning, help man the Britepaths donation table at Shoppers Food Warehouse. Directly behind the table are (from left) Sharon Bulova, Gerry Connolly, Scott Krinke and Christina Garris.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINA GARRIS

Volunteers and the Fastran bus driver (in yellow vest) bring the donated food to Britepaths' office at the end of the day.

Community Comes Through for Britepaths

Area residents help Stuff the Bus for hungry families.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

People doing their best to get their lives in order and stand on their own, two feet often need a bit of help along the way. And that's where Britepaths comes in, providing low-income, working families with emergency assistance, financial literacy and one-on-one mentoring.

Such short-term, safety-net services come as lifesavers to Fairfax County neighbors in need. But many times, they need something even more basic – food to quell their hunger.

So last Saturday, Feb. 10, Britepaths, local residents, volunteers and the Shoppers Food Warehouse at Fair City Mall combined to Stuff the Bus with food, money and grocery-store gift cards to help them out. All in all, it was a big success.

Thanks to the caring efforts of the local community, 900 pounds of food and pantry supplies, valued at \$1,548, were donated. Also contributed were \$1,115 in Shoppers gift cards, plus \$365 in cash and checks. "We are overwhelmed by the generosity of our community," said Britepaths spokeswoman Heather Webb. "It's exciting to see how they came together for this."

Britepaths' Programs Director Christina Garris said the food drive was for the families in the organization's mentoring programs. "They're working toward self-sufficiency," she said. "And having food stabilizes them while they're trying to reach their goals."

THE DONATED FOOD goes to Britepaths' emergency food pantry so its Food Bridge



Additional volunteers help out at Britepaths' Stuff the Bus food drive, last Saturday, at Shoppers Food Warehouse in Fair City Mall.

program can provide emergency and short-term food assistance to those struggling to make ends meet. It helps them bridge the gap until they can recover from a serious predicament.

Families are referred to the program by social workers and generally receive assistance – grocery-store gift cards, toiletries and food staples – for some four to six months. Other clients may receive emergency assistance once or twice to tide them over through a brief crisis.

Webb further noted that many of their food recipients are also in the organization's Financial Mentoring or Project BRIDGE programs, en route to becoming financially self-reliant. So, she explained, "The gift cards are another tool to help them with their budgeting skills."

Additional Food Bridge initiatives include Our Daily Veggies farmers market vouchers and Food4Thought weekend food assis-

tance for local students in need. "The vouchers are so our clients can purchase fresh fruits, vegetables and proteins," said Garris. "Then they can prepare meals with these healthy foods." And via Food4Thought, schools may obtain needed items to send home with students who'd otherwise go hungry over the weekend.

"But we can't do this by ourselves," added Garris. "So the partnerships through our community are key to our success to keep our pantry stocked throughout the year. And Shoppers Food Warehouse Manager Scott Krinke has been extremely generous, helping us get the foods and gift cards we need."

Saturday's food drive ran from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with members of Volunteers for Change – part of Volunteer Fairfax – helping, along with people from Fairfax County's Coordinated Services Planning. Customers entering the store were given a list of especially needed food items they

could purchase that day, if desired, and donate at Britepaths' table in the store. Or they could buy store gift cards to contribute.

Also dropping by to support the effort were county Board of Supervisors Chairman Sharon Bulova and U.S. Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-11). "Scott said he never turns down a food drive; he's a committed and caring corporate neighbor," said Bulova. "He puts back into the community, and this is a beautiful store – clean, well-stocked and popular. So having food drives here ensures success."

CALLING BRITEPATHS a "great organization," Bulova said, "We're so fortunate to be able to partner with nonprofits like Britepaths. Our unique culture in Fairfax County is providing human services in partnership with nonprofits, and Britepaths is among the best. They're hands-on and help people get back on their feet after a downward spiral or personal crisis."

Delighted with the Stuff the Bus program – on Saturday, it was a Fastran bus – Connolly said, "I hope more grocery stores participate because it really makes a difference. Even in affluent communities like ours, there are pockets of great need. And this is an excellent example of a caring community responding to that need."

This was the fourth year Shoppers Food Warehouse participated in this program. "I want to be a help to the community, and this is one way I can do it," explained Krinke. "Shoppers partners with Britepaths for Stuff the Bus, and Britepaths sets up the date and time with our corporate headquarters."

"I've never gone hungry, but I see it out there, so this is my way of doing something about it," he continued. "This is a great area. A lot of kind, giving people are responding positively to this event, and that's what makes this store and this program a success."