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Loss of rides could cost jobs, homes

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Worn-out vans force transit service to end

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ARLINGTON - On the bumpy ride home from her job making cotton candy, Sherri Futrell played with her 8-month-old son and wondered aloud where she would be without the free ride provided through Mission Arlington.

"I'd be stuck," said Futrell, 32. "I'd lose my job, my apartment and everything else. I'd be back in the shape I was before - homeless, probably going from shelter to shelter."

Last year more than 700 low-income adults and children relied on Mission Arlington for transportation to work, job interviews, day-care centers and doctors' offices. Now, with a \$40,000 federal grant running out at the end of May and no money for vans, the nonprofit organization plans to end its transportation program.

Unless Mission Arlington can find replacements for its four vans, the city will be without transportation for its low-income population.

Mission Arlington Director Tillie Burgin said the four vans that the organization uses daily are worn out and require frequent repairs. Without money to replace the 1980s model vans, which log 5,000 to 6,000 miles a month, Mission Arlington can no longer afford to provide transportation, she said.

"We know there is a need," Burgin said. "We have the manpower to do it and desire to do it, we just don't have the vehicles to do it."

Although the city awarded Mission Arlington a \$40,000 Community Development Block Grant last year to pay the salaries of three part-time drivers and one coordinator, Burgin said she did not apply again this year because she underestimated the need and did not think the vehicles would be usable. She said that she would provide volunteer drivers if vans were available.

City Council member Kay Taebel said she dreads losing the program.

"My big concern is we're letting a program die that we started, and when that happens the naysayers grab it and say, 'See, it was never meant to be,'" Taebel said.

"There's a tremendous need and I see this as a preventative service that helps us save taxpayers' dollars down the line," she said. "We can pay for transportation that helps people get to jobs now or we can pay later to put them in hospitals, shelters and other facilities."

Mayor Richard Greene said he is also concerned, but has no immediate solutions.

"I admire the work that Tillie does so much that I would like to help," he said. "She's one of those people who has a heart for caring for the needs of others, and when people like that say there's a need for something, I start looking for ways to help them."

Without Mission Arlington's transportation program, clients of Catholic Charities who rely on the

service to get to English classes will have difficulty making it to class, said Katie Burns, director of immigration and refugee services for Catholic Charities.

"We were relying on them quite a bit," Burns said. "It's going to leave a big hole."

On Tuesday, Catholic Charities' request for \$14,000 in grant money was eliminated from this year's proposed budget by the City Council. The agency wanted to use the funding to provide transportation to its clients, Burns said. Last year, Catholic Charities provided English classes to 189 refugees and employment services to 600.

"About half of the English-as-a-second-language students are in need of transportation all the time," Burns said.

The crisis Mission Arlington faces comes as the city is taking a serious look at transportation needs. An in-depth study on the transit requirements of the city's 111,000 commuters is under way.

Councilwoman Paula Hightower said that she does not doubt there is a need, but that she is not sure a bus system is the answer.

"To just go out and hire buses to run all over Arlington, I don't know that that's the solution. Arlington needs to be creative and innovative and identify ways to address it," she said.

Taebel said the city can allocate CDBG funds for emergency cab vouchers this year and then ask Arlington Human Service Planners to study the issue so that a plan can be devised for next year.

The only transportation that the city provides is Handitran, which last year served 5,200 elderly and handicapped residents, said Sue Scanlan, transit manager. Users pay \$1 each way and must call the city 24 hours in advance.

In 1992-93, Handitran made 71,515 one-way trips. About 2,000 requests were denied, either because the resident didn't meet Handitran qualifications or vans weren't available.

Last year, a United Way study showed that 12 percent of households in east Arlington lack transportation, compared with a 7.8 percent county average, United Way officials said.

Futrell, who is saving money to buy a car, said that she would never be where she is today without Mission Arlington's help.

"I lost my job because I didn't have a ride, and then I became homeless," she said. "Mission Arlington enabled me to live again."

PHOTO

Bruce Maxwell

Robert Humphus, operational manager at Mission

Arlington, works under a van while volunteer Bill White tries to

start it.

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