



Photo by Michael Swanger

Volunteers at The FreeStore.

# Helping families to start over

## Church program becomes non-profit entity

By Michael Swanger

In what started in 2001 as an outreach committee at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in West Des Moines only to become in 2005 an independent non-profit organization complete with a warehouse in downtown Des Moines, the FreeStore continues to serve victims of domestic violence thanks to a dedicated staff of unpaid volunteers.

The FreeStore provides household items (furniture, bedding, tableware, small appliances, etc.) to women and children who have escaped abusive households and have sought safety at Children and Families of Iowa's Domestic Abuse Services. Many times the victims flee with little but the clothes on their backs. Once they become stabilized and have secured housing and employment, the FreeStore steps in to provide necessary household items at no charge.

"They are awed at the help we give them," says Terry Swanson, chairwoman of the FreeStore's seven-member board and a member of St. Timothy's. "They have so many problems, including legal things like child custody, threats of violence, finding a job and finding a place to live. This is one less thing they have to worry about."

Swanson and more than 60 other unpaid volunteers, many of whom are members of St. Timothy's (which provides the

FreeStore a grant), last year served 258 families with about \$400,000 worth of household items on a budget of about \$30,000. Approximately 90 percent of the families they served were clients of Children and Families of Iowa, though they also served clients of Iowa Homeless Youth, Interfaith Hospitality Network and other groups.

### The FreeStore

282-3733

[www.thefreestore.org](http://www.thefreestore.org)

### St. Timothy's Episcopal Church

1020 24th Street

225-2020

[www.timothyiowa.org](http://www.timothyiowa.org)

### Services

Saturday: 5 p.m.

Sunday: 8 and 10:15 a.m.

"I can't say enough about our volunteers," Swanson says.

Four days a week, FreeStore volunteers pick up donated items. Swanson says the group has received goods from local hotels, churches and individuals and that they are always in need of gently used, donated items, as well as cash donations.

"We don't take beat-up stuff. It's an image thing for these victims," Swanson says. "And the people who give us stuff are so pleased to know that it is going to a good cause." **WL**