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HISTORY OF The Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers

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In 1990, a group of religious leaders from southeastern Michigan began discussing the need for a faith-based program that could reach out to a rapidly-growing population of older and disabled adults who were struggling to maintain their safety, independence and dignity by remaining in their own homes. Urged forward by the Area Agency on Aging 1-B, and supported by the National Federation of Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers, these leaders formed a task force to begin two new caregiving initiatives in Oakland and Macomb Counties. Catholic Services of Macomb offered to host one of the budding programs, and in July of 1992, a Program Coordinator was hired to begin an Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers program designed to serve frail and disabled individuals in Macomb County. After two years of development with local congregation representatives, the program became an independent community-owned charitable corporation, and a local Board of Directors was founded to govern the new organization in October of 1994. In early 2012, service provision was expanded to include portions of Oakland County.

Since its inception, the program has grown at a rapid rate and is currently supported by over 70 local congregations and dozens of businesses and organizations. Referrals for service and cooperative efforts have been arranged with over 80 local service providers.

Initial volunteer services began in December of 1992, with a group of twelve eager volunteers. Over the past nineteen years, the program has registered over 3,300 dedicated volunteers, and through their hard work has been able to serve over 2,200 older and disabled adults. Volunteers, from all walks of life, as young as ten and as experienced as ninety, work together to provide essential transportation; help with housekeeping, meal preparation, home repairs and yard work; relief breaks for full-time family caregivers; friendly visits, reassuring phone calls and emotional support to the isolated and lonely; as well as a variety of other services that help our struggling neighbors get by at home.

While the large numbers of active volunteers and persons served are strong testimony to the success of this program in the community, the real impact has been measured one life at a time. One early volunteer was given the opportunity to befriend a 32-year-old woman who, disabled by Multiple Sclerosis, had not been outside her home in over a year. There was no room to build an access ramp in their yard, and her 70-year-old caregiver mother had many disabilities of her own. The new IVC volunteer was eager to improve life for these struggling people, so he began making simple repairs to the rundown home in which they lived. Then, in order to get the young isolated woman back into the world, he would carry her and her wheelchair down the front steps and take her for strolls in the neighborhood. Soon, their excursions included trips to local shopping malls and visits to long-lost friends. Eventually, after nearly two years of life back in the real world, the young woman, met up with an old beau and was soon married to him. Such an incredible difference in the life of a once hopeless young girl!

While not every volunteer makes such a dramatic and visible impact on each person they serve, it is hard to measure the impact of what they give through each simple act. Perhaps the trip they provide to a local doctor's office will be given just in time to save someone's life.