

Piedmont-based foundation assists working poor

By Jeremy Bates

Imagine working full time, yet not having enough money to pay for family health insurance. One in four American workers earns less than \$18,800 a year below the poverty line for a family of four according to Business Week, and such low-paying jobs often do not offer medical benefits, sick days, vacation, retirement plans and/or child care.

These working poor and their families are not confined to areas such as Fruitvale or East Palo; they are here in Piedmont, making a living as nannies and gardeners. Piedmont resident Lester Ellis has not only pondered the plight of the working poor; he has done something about it. Ellis recently created an innovative charity to help lift families above the poverty line — the 1200 Foundation, which was named for Ellis' original idea of asking donors to give \$100 a month (\$1200 a year) to support programs assisting employed-but-impooverished local people. Ellis has since adjusted the program to allow for monthly gifts of \$49-\$249.

However, what sets the 1200 Foundation apart is not the amount participants give, but the way they give it: by authorizing ongoing, monthly withdrawals direct from their bank accounts. While such a billing system has existed for paying off loans, credit cards and car insurance bills, Ellis says his is the only charity he's found that has adopted the direct withdrawal method.

This unique payment apparatus reflects the extra commitment Ellis is seeking from 1200 Foundation participants. So far, 30 families have made that commitment, while another 50 have expressed interest. Ellis aims to expand his seven-member foundation board to nine and raise \$100,000 in the foundation's first year.

"I spent almost a year trying to put together an organization that will be able to award a significant amount of grant money to existing programs that are clearly being effective in assisting the working poor," said Ellis, citing the Family Independent Initiative and other local job-placement, financial-advising and/or loan-assistance organizations.

The 1200 Foundation will not only distribute funds, but will advocate worker-friendly policies as well — within the parameters permitted for non-profit organizations.

"We will, in every way we can without jeopardizing our non-profit status, attempt to influence policy to help the working poor," said Ellis. "But almost everything we do has to be looked at carefully to make sure we're not stepping over the line and becoming lobbyists. We can take a stand on a general issue. But we have to be careful to not line up behind a specific piece of legislation, for instance.

"Minimum wage is a major concern of ours," he continued. "The federal government has turned its back on the working poor in so many ways and the issue of [low] minimum wage is absolutely horrible. Only 11 states out of 50 have higher minimum wage than the federal government — which is \$5.50 — and after payroll taxes, many full-time workers take in less than \$10,000 per year."

Ellis' comments are quite timely, as separate Democratic and Republican legislative amendments to raise the minimum wage for the first time in nearly a decade failed in the Senate on Monday.

Ellis is teaming up with the East Bay Community Foundation, which has been coordinating local philanthropic works since

1928 and last year oversaw nearly \$20 million in grants. He said EBCF's legal and financial expertise would be instrumental in guiding his fledgling foundation.

"Giving to KQED and Amnesty International is wonderful," said former Piedmont Mayor and current 1200 Foundation board member Valerie Matzger. "But giving to the 1200 Foundation is a little more like stepping up to the plate. That appealed to me. This is about improving things where you are. Not that you shouldn't go and support other organizations; of course you should. But Oakland is in such tough shape, and a large number of local people are skittering on the edge of disaster."

"One thing goes wrong, and they've got a big problem," Matzger continued. "You don't have to look far to find them; these are people we know: they help in our homes, work in the garden; watch the grandchildren. This administration has given a lot of tax cuts to people on top, while the people on the bottom aren't benefiting. A lot of us feel this way, and we're doing something about it. We can't do it all ourselves, but it's a start."

Piedmonter Ann Frizell has been helping Ellis publicize the foundation.

"I'm looking to find new donors and help the foundation get off the ground in a few ways," she said. "I feel very fortunate in my life and 'I'm glad this [foundation] came around when I have time to devote to a cause like this. This is the first year the kids are both in college, so I've had time to work on brochures and start giving back to the community."

For information on joining the 1200 Foundation — which accepts monthly donations ranging from \$49-\$249 — email Lester Ellis at 1200foundation@pacbell.net.