

Trying to lock up a lifeline

By [Leonora LaPeter Anton](#), Times Staff Writer Published Thursday, July 30, 2009

ST. PETERSBURG — A man in military fatigues and black boots slouched in a plastic chair at the Daystar Life Center and waited for his number to be called. To his left sat a young mother whose pantry was almost empty. To his right was a woman who was about to lose her electricity.

Emmet Larry, 50, hoped for a pair of underwear, a bar of soap, maybe some soup. But what he really needed was a bike lock. He was afraid someone would steal the scarred red Huffly he uses to get around and collect cans for money.

It was just a small moment in the city. Life hinges on this kind of thing, for some people. If Larry has his bike, he's good. If he loses it, then what?

He left the waiting room and walked outside to check on it. A minute later he did it again. Then again. Five times in all.

Sadie Oliver, who does intake at the social services agency, found Larry out there by his bike. She led him back inside, down a hallway to a room with a plain desk, a metal filing cabinet and a single potted plant.

She reviewed his paperwork. Refugee from Liberia. Victim of torture. No income.

"What can we do for you today?" she asked.

"I ain't got no lock for my bike," he said in his best English. "Can you get me one? I'm worried someone will steal it."

Oliver paused. Daystar, which helps about 80 to 100 people a day, had shelves of Ramen noodles and canned peaches, tampons and toothbrushes. She had the underwear he needed, the soap and detergent. But she wasn't sure about a bike lock.

She went down a hallway to look. Larry sat there, wincing as pain shot up his shoulder. It still hurt — five years after coming to the United States — from the way his Liberian

captors had tied his arms behind his back. He pointed to a scar on his head where they'd shot him.

Oliver returned. She placed a new lock on the desk in front of him.

"OHHHHHHH," he said, his bloodshot eyes lighting up.

He raced outside.

Times reporter Leonora LaPeter Anton can be reached at lapeter@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8640.

FAST FACTS

About the series

Encounters is dedicated to small but meaningful stories. Sometimes they will play out far from the tumult of the daily news; sometimes they may be part of the news. To comment or suggest an idea for a story, contact editor Mike Wilson at mike@sptimes.com or (727) 892-2924..FAST FACTS

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times 490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111 [Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the St. Petersburg Times](#) [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)