

Donors give a hand, and a coat, to homeless

Thousands receive food, clothes during holidays, thanks to nonprofit



Bob Kight moves a box filled with donations into a truck. The donated clothes help the homeless in Anne Arundel County, Baltimore and Washington. (Sun photo by Doug Kapustin / December 20, 2007)

By Nicole Fuller | sun reporter
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On day one, the donations trickled in: A man driving a cream-colored Lincoln Town Car stopped by the vast parking lot along a busy stretch of road in Annapolis to leave a trash bag full of sweaters and pants.

Millersville mom Meredith Gray came with her son, Tommy, 6, bearing what he said were "some of my toys that I got for my birthday."

On the site of the Riva Road farmers' market where donations for clothes, food, toys and other items will be accepted until 4 p.m. today, the volunteers worked diligently to retrieve the loads of gifts, sorting them into boxes, and eventually loading them onto 22 trucks to deliver to thousands of homeless people across the region on Christmas Eve.

The clothing drive, sponsored by Giving Back Inc., has been providing a Christmas boost to the homeless for about 25 years. Thanks to donations, hundreds of volunteers distribute clothing on Christmas Eve to shelters in Anne Arundel County, Baltimore and Washington.

"They walk away with their hands full, at least that one night of the year, they get human interaction," said Steve Anstett, director of Giving Back. "I tell my volunteers, don't be afraid to touch a shoulder or give a hug. These poor men, women and children on the street go through the whole year walking around being invisible."

The group also accepts monetary donations, which are still needed this year to fund one of the group's most concentrated efforts -- distributing new backpacks containing hats, gloves, thermal underwear, a sweat suit and socks -- which has cost \$35,000 this year.

The donations received at the Riva Road site are a mix of contributions from individuals, businesses, schools, clubs and religious groups.

Students at the School of Incarnation in Millersville dropped change into collection jars in class. St. Martin's Episcopal Day School's students and their families donated 25 backpacks. Volunteers from the Wayman Good Hope AME Church in Severna Park provided bag lunches.

Sheer manpower is important, too.

Joseph Dominick, a burly Pasadena teen, lifted and hauled plastic bins, trash and shopping bags onto long tables where the items are sorted and placed into boxes.

As other volunteers, such as Amanda Frye, 17, of Crofton, folded and separated the items into boxes, the crackle of Christmas carols played from a nearby radio.

Each of the 22 trucks is packed with items based on the needs of the shelter or location to which it is assigned. At St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, which runs a soup kitchen and shelter, there's a need for "lots of used clothes," a note hung inside one of the trucks read.

The volunteers also distribute backpacks and other items to outside locations where the homeless congregate.

Laura Greenberg, the Annapolitan who founded Giving Back, was recently at the Riva Road donation site, offering a personal thanks to everyone who donated and not hesitating to coo, "if you could, we could really use formula and diapers, too."

Greenberg recalls a poignant message from her mother, which spurred her charity: The pair were walking in downtown Washington on a snowy winter day when she was about 12, and happened upon a homeless man.

"My mother said, 'Linda, give your coat and your hat to the man.'

"It looked silly, but it made a profound effect on me," said Greenberg, a retiree who lives in Annapolis but hibernates in Florida during the winter. "As we walked to the hotel, for the first time in my life, I was really cold. It made a very big impression on me."

A few decades later, she wanted to teach her two sons the same lesson.

"We started to go on the weekends with bag lunches on the streets of Baltimore, and with blankets," Greenberg said.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, teams of volunteers will distribute the donations to 20 or so shelters -- some for victims of domestic violence, veterans or teens -- in Anne Arundel County, Baltimore and Washington.

That night, another set of volunteers will distribute the backpacks full of clothes -- an effort that began about three years ago -- to homeless people on the streets of Baltimore. Chevy's Fresh Mex, a restaurant chain, will serve a hot meal.

Bobby Keating, 17, of Severna Park has been involved in the effort for five years, saying it "really puts a lot of stuff in perspective."

One time while distributing coats in Baltimore, the group ran out, leaving a man who was wearing just a flannel shirt without. Keating gave him his.

"Just the expression on his face, his gratitude, it was unbelievable. To do God's work is just awesome," Keating said.

Last year, Greenberg said, nearly 1,000 homeless people lined up outside of the Baltimore Rescue Mission for a taste of the group's charity.

"There's a silent war out there of people who are displaced, who are out there because of abuse, divorce, drugs, a lot of vets," Greenberg said. "Every year there's a lot of vets. Now we're seeing vets from Iraq. When people have problems, they can only stay with family for so long. Then it gets old. ... when people understand that, then they give."