

COVID, economic woes pressure North Texas nonprofits. Are volunteers delivering?

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ARLINGTON

Coronavirus cases and travel restrictions may be down for the holiday season, but north Texas families' needs are greater than ever amid rising living costs and supply chain issues, local volunteers said.

Robin Wheeler, Arlington Charities' pantry manager, did not expect an influx of families in need for the holiday season. The nonprofit at 811 Secretary Drive held its annual Thanksgiving distribution Nov. 17 and 18, however, and served as many as 1,300 families, she said. Hundreds more have signed up for Christmas distribution Dec. 15 and 16.

Wheeler attributed the influx of need to rising prices. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics announced in October the consumer price index rose 6.2% over the last year, the steepest increase since November 1990. Around 11% of Tarrant County residents live below the poverty line, and around a quarter live paycheck-to-paycheck, according to the 2018 United Way ALICE report

"I think that the need is just as much there as it was before if not more," Wheeler said. "I think a lot more families are facing food insecurity; a lot of people still haven't returned to the full-time workforce."

Volunteers at Mission Arlington had assembled more than 4,000 of the 6,000 turkey boxes for the group to hand out Thanksgiving Day, according to Tillie Burgin, the mission's executive director. The prominent, faith-based group fed more than 24,000 families last year, and Burgin said she hopes for long lines Thursday.

"It's a wonderful time for the community to get to know each other," Burgin said.

The distributions are among a few of the ones planned across Tarrant County this holiday season. Tarrant Area Food Bank will host several holiday drives throughout December. The group's next event, Holiday Mega Mobile Market, is set for Dec. 2 in Fort Worth at 1911 Montgomery St.

MORE VOLUNTEERS?

Mission Arlington staff do not fully know how long their lines will be and how many volunteers will be there to help until Thanksgiving Day. Burgin said volunteers have kept high spirits as they pull together boxes. Tuesday morning's volunteer crowd comprised grade-schoolers to adults, sorting holiday staples both inside and outside the group's dedicated "Thanksgiving building."

“The energy level is huge and high. We’ve got a lot of high school kids ... and I don’t think they’ve quit bouncing,” Burgin said.

Volunteers, community leaders and nonprofit staff sense that the community is more willing to rally around those most in need this holiday season. The average cost of a Thanksgiving dinner for 10 totals over \$53, a 14% increase from last year, according to 2021 American Farm Bureau Federation estimates.

Amy J. Schultz, artist and editor of lifestyle publication Sociability, said she’s noticed more people looking for volunteer opportunities around town. The need inspired her to pull together the Holiday Do-Gooders Directory, a repository of toy, food and clothing drives, as well as ways to volunteer and support women and families. Schultz solicited directory listing ideas from social media, local leaders and other organizations. The directory includes nearly 50 events and fundraising efforts around Arlington, Pantego and Dalworthington Gardens.

“I think the main thing that people are really very aware of is families that are kind of on the financial edge and the sense that there are so many more of them this year,” Schultz said.

The Communities Foundation of Texas lists volunteer opportunities from around 70 organizations across the region.

Wheeler said Arlington Charities received enough donations for Thanksgiving to expand their menu offering to include additives including marshmallows for sweet potatoes and pie crusts.

“We’re actually able to give them a bigger and better Thanksgiving menu than years’ past,” Wheeler said.

Both Burgin and Wheeler said their organizations could always use holiday items that sometimes get overlooked during donation drives, such as cranberry sauce, stuffing and sweet potatoes.

Wheeler said Arlington Charities can always use donations of canned soup and ramen.

Those interested in signing up for Arlington Charities’ holiday distribution in December or volunteering can register by visiting arlingtoncharities.org.

Mission Arlington Thanksgiving Day volunteers should arrive at 210 W. South St. by 8 a.m. Thursday to deliver food. The group is also accepting volunteers to pack turkey baskets and items to package. A full list is available on the mission website.

Kailey Broussard covers Arlington for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram as a Report for America corps member. Report for America is a national nonprofit program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered cities and issues. To support this reporter’s work, and to support local journalism in Arlington, consider donating here: <https://bit.ly/3gYyuOQ>

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