

## Food Banks Gain As Holiday Revels Are Trimmed

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Amid the economic doom and gloom -- the layoffs, the furloughs, the perpetual search for efficiencies -- a handful of cutbacks around town have signified something different: hope.

In recent weeks, a few companies have quietly called off their holiday parties, canceled their fruit baskets to clients and funneled the money to local food banks for the needy.

Some of those donors, shying from publicity, declined to talk about it, but those who did explained it this way: They were choosing to go without this season so that the neediest don't have to.

Such donations have come from a variety of sources, from individual employees sacrificing holiday bonuses to the [International Monetary Fund](#) canceling its annual dinner to give an extra \$13,000 to local food banks.

"It's amazing what's happening out there," said Kasandra Gunter Robinson of the [Capital Area Food Bank](#), the primary distribution center for the Washington area's 700 food agencies. "It just shows you there are people still trying to do their part."

For [John Kane](#), the decision was a easy one. For the past nine years, Kane, the head of a large moving and storage business, has thrown lavish Christmas parties at his home in Potomac. In recent years, the soiree had grown to include an in-house raw seafood bar, cigar rooms and 300 movers and shakers packed under one roof. Those attending are usually a mix of relatives, business associates and such political heavyweights as former Maryland lieutenant governor [Michael S. Steele](#), state [Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler](#) (D) and state Senate President [Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr.](#) (D).

But this year, as Kane, a former state Republican chairman, and his wife, Mary, who served as Maryland's secretary of state, watched the economic news on television go from bad to worse, they started talking about the Christmas party and how that money might be better spent on the hungry. So they drafted a letter and sent it out in lieu of the usual invitations.

"I am reminded of what my father often said," Kane wrote, "which was that homeless people still need homes, the hungry still need food and the sick still need medical care, no matter what the shape of the economy."

He meant it to be a call to action, hoping to encourage others to do the same.

"I don't know if it worked out that way, if others ended up doing something, too," he said. "But it was the right thing to do. We'd much rather feed 1,000 than 300. It's what my father would have done."

Such donations are needed more than ever, food bank workers said.

At the Capital Area Food Bank, corporate and foundation giving has decreased 30 percent this year. Meanwhile, calls to the emergency food referral line during the past six months have increased 113 percent, compared with last year.

Every week, the lines grow longer at Ambassador Baptist Church in Anacostia, one of many places in the District where emergency food supplied by the regional food bank is handed out to families. Some mothers have started lining up as early as 6 a.m., an hour before the doors open, to make sure they get a hefty bag of food for their family.

"For a long time, there have been two Washingtons: the ones who live across the bridge downtown and the ones in need here," said the church's pastor, Roy Settles. "It's good to hear that people and companies are helping out. Some never realize the need that exists."

Every dollar donated to the food bank provides three meals, workers say.

Such numbers are the reason the IMF canceled for the first time the dinner it usually throws in the fall for the financial ministers of 185 member countries.

"With a food crisis going on, in the world's poorest countries and locally, it didn't seem appropriate to hold something like that," spokesman William Murray said. Instead, the money went to relief efforts in Haiti and Liberia and to the local food bank.

Across town, another group gave up holiday cards this year and donated the money to feed the hungry.

"Every bit helps," said Robb MacKie, president of American Bakery Association, which represents the wholesale baking industry. Instead of its usual fancy, foil-printed greetings, his office sent online e-cards to contacts on [Capitol Hill](#) and federal agencies.

"In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't a huge amount, about \$1,500. But it was one small way we could help someone out there," he said.

One of the people such donations have helped is Wygenia Henderson, 56, an unemployed mother of two, who picked up an emergency bag of groceries this week at the Father McKenna Center near Union station. The bag of canned beans, tomato paste and instant rice will help her stretch her family's meager food budget through the holidays.

"People helping people. I have no problem with that," she said, about companies giving up traditions to donate to the hungry. "That's what the holiday spirit is all about, isn't it?"