

Economic Times Demand Giving Beyond the Holidays

The Changing Face of Poverty

by Zenitha Prince
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For many people, it's a way of giving thanks, of acknowledging a sacred season by means of giving back to the community. But philanthropy should not be confined to just the end of the year, advocates say.

"It's a day to day for us, not just Thanksgiving and Christmas, and it's a lifestyle," said Gwen Pope, manager of the SHABACH! Emergency Resources and Empowerment Center at the First Baptist Church of Glenarden in Landover, Md.

And it's needed more than ever before, Pope and others say. The tentacles of the two-year recession—high unemployment and underemployment, leading foreclosure rates and depleting wealth—continue to have a stranglehold on many Black communities in the area, creating a new class of indigent people.

"We and our partner agencies have definitely seen an increase in the demand for our services (25 percent) and not only have we seen an increase but a change in who is coming to us for food assistance," said Shamia Holloway, communications manager, Capital Area Food Bank.

The Food Bank serves as a hub, from which food is distributed to hunger-fighting organizations in the Maryland-Washington, D.C.-Virginia area.

According to Holloway, the Food Bank serves more than 478,000 persons a year in Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia. Traditionally, the vast majority of those clients had been "working poor"—people who may have been working multiple jobs or been underemployed but struggling to meet the monthly financial demands of transportation, housing, medical expenses, etc.

"But like our partner agencies we're seeing first-time visitors, people who have never been to the food bank coming now," Holloway said. "We've actually seen former donors who are now coming to us for food assistance. So the face of hunger has changed and the recession has played a big role."

SHABACH!, which acts as a liaison to social services and donates food, clothing and household items to persons in the Washington, D.C. metro area—though it has seen clients from as far away as West Virginia—is also getting an influx of "professionals," Pope chimed in. These are educators, government workers and corporate types who were laid off from their jobs, or saw

their businesses closed; have exhausted their savings and retirement accounts and are now depending on the community and the government for help.

“These are very conscientious people that want to work but there are no jobs out there for them..., who are not looking for a handout—and really don’t want it—but this is what they have to do in order to maintain,” Pope said. “And they are new to the system, meaning social services, and they’re trying to find out how it works, what they can get, or what is available to them and a lot of them have become very frustrated.

“... [So] even though they (the clients) drive up in a big car, everyone is reminded that they may be sleeping in that same car.”

Alleviating—and ultimately changing—the dire situation begins at a personal level, said A. Adar Ayira, project manager, More in the Middle Initiative, an Associated Black Charities (ABC) program designed to strengthen and expand the Black middle class.

“For themselves, what people can do is to really become more educated on financial management,” Ayira told the *AFRO*. “This economic climate is giving all of us an opportunity to clean up our financial houses, to figure out what we can tighten and to make us more conscious about working ourselves out of whatever holes we’re in.”

For others, the traditional ways of “giving back” continue to be important, Holloway said.

“It’s very easy. You can donate—with \$1 we can provide three meals; you can host a food drive at your school or church—they are a critical way by which we get food.”

Also, with individual and corporate donors giving less to nonprofits such as theirs, volunteers who offer their time and energy to sort food and pack boxes are just as important to the Food Bank’s work, Holloway added. Last year, 14,000 volunteers saved the organization \$1.7 million in administrative costs. “Without community support, without donations and volunteers we would not be able to feed the thousands who are suffering from hunger,” she said. “The need is there, the problem is real and it’s up to the community to take action and make a difference.”

Diane Bell McKoy, president/CEO of ABC, which is based in Baltimore, said too many people are dissuaded from giving back because they think they must do something “big.”

“I want to change people’s definition of help... everything makes a difference,” she said.

For example, in churches with social services ministries, simply supporting the church financially may be an indirect way of giving back to the community. And there are other ways parishioners can give.

“There are churches that are beginning to recognize that within their congregations there are people of expertise... So when people think of volunteering...lots of people can do soup kitchens and shelters and that’s critical. But, because often our community is also disconnected from knowing what they don’t know, in order to change up economic outcomes volunteering knowledge and resources and relationships and access is critical. You don’t have to go far to make a difference.”