

## A Giving Season That Never Ends

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They gather every weekday morning with a quiet sense of mission. They pick up their routes for the day in a small office at the back of the Colesville Baptist Church.

The dozen men and women--and sometimes children who tag along--reconvene a short while later inside a secluded staff entrance at Holy Cross Hospital, where they will pick up the items they will take with them.

Then they load their trunks, climb in two to a car, and head off in separate directions to crisscross a large chunk of Montgomery County. Their purpose is to meet with people left homebound by advanced age, illness or disability, and to deliver their precious commodities; a friendly hello and two meals for the day, one hot and one cold.

These workers with the Colesville chapter of the nonprofit Meals on Wheels program are but one small part of a vast network of volunteers in Montgomery County and across the Washington region who give their time and effort in a multitude of ways to make life better for others less fortunate, usually toiling unnoticed by the busy workaday world around them.

"Everyone should do some kind of volunteer work, no matter how old or how young," said Pat Mangus, a stay-at-home mother of three girls from Ashton who helps deliver meals with the group every Friday. "Everyone should do something to give back to their community."

The start of the winter holiday season that Thanksgiving day heralds usually marks a beginning of a spike in volunteerism, donations and other philanthropic activity as people take time to count their blessings and give in return to help others. Yet for many, this kind of activity is a yearlong effort, one that will continue throughout the cold of winter and far beyond.

In fact, the nonprofit agencies that keep this volunteer network running year-round have become increasingly important in Montgomery and throughout the nation over the past two decades, as large federal social services programs have been greatly cut back. The county's Department of Health and Human Services, for example, has contracts with about 400 nonprofit agencies that help deliver services to the homeless, the working poor, the disabled, the elderly and others in need.

"It's critically important," said Charles Short, the county's social services director. "The only way we've been able to respond [to the cuts] is through partnering with private nonprofit organizations."

And there is a growing need for their services.

Last week, for example, the county presented the findings of the latest report on what it costs families to make ends meet. The report was prepared by Wider Opportunities for Women, a national research and advocacy group that has studied this "self-sufficiency standard" in 14 regions across the country.

It found that a family of four, for example, needs \$49,668 to cover only basic expenses such as food, housing, child care and taxes.

Short estimated that more than 62,000 Montgomery households fall below the self-sufficiency standard minimum level of income, accounting for about 15 percent of the county's 850,000 residents.

### Changing Faces

The nerve center of the county's volunteer effort is the Volunteer Center, a small county-run office in Rockville that serves as a clearinghouse for more than 600 nonprofit agencies. The Volunteer Center helps match volunteers with agencies and works to increase awareness of the need.

Andrea Jolly, the center's director, said there are currently about 2,000 ongoing volunteer opportunities, in communities throughout Montgomery, available through the center.

County residents, in general, tend to be very active in volunteering and philanthropic activities, Jolly said. Still, the needs in the community outpace the pool of volunteers available to tutor children, spend time with the elderly or fix up group homes.

Yet the face of volunteerism has been changing in recent years. "There are just as many volunteers as in the past, but the ways they're volunteering is different," Jolly said.

The increasing numbers of families that have two employed parents means that the numbers of stay-at-home mothers available for duty during the weekdays have decreased. That loss has been offset, Jolly said, by increases among other groups, such as corporations that encourage and give time for their employees to volunteer. Schools are promoting--and requiring--community service among high school students. And more and more people are taking part in periodic volunteering efforts.

She noted that the annual Community Service Day in Montgomery has grown into a large-scale event that last month drew 7,000 people to take part in a day devoted to goodwill.

Agencies, she said, have become better at providing flexibility for people to volunteer at times and places that are convenient for them, and arrangements can be made that would fit virtually any schedule.

The nonprofits are also turning to the Internet. In fact, the Volunteer Center runs a Web site--[www.montgomeryvolunteer.org](http://www.montgomeryvolunteer.org)--that lists agencies in need of volunteers, with descriptions and contact information. Some agencies run their own Web sites as a way of putting the call out.

"In a lot of ways, the burden is on the nonprofit agencies in finding new ways and opportunities for people to take part," Jolly said.

#### Looking for Ways to Help

One such agency is Bethesda Cares, which is temporarily operating out of a small storefront office in downtown Bethesda's restaurant district while its permanent space a few blocks away is being renovated.

The agency relies on donations and on more than 450 volunteers--plus a tiny but enthusiastic staff of full- and part-time workers--to serve lunch six days a week and dinner on Sundays to the homeless and working poor, provide medical care, a social worker, eviction prevention, job-search assistance, plus other essentials such as showers, toiletries and donated clothes to people who often have few, if any, other places to turn.

Susan Kirk, the agency's director, said she has seen an increase in corporate volunteerism in recent years. In turn, she said, the involvement with corporate donors is helping the agency improve its business practices and become more efficient.

She cited Wall & Associates, a Bethesda-based small Internet services company, whose staff members have donated their expertise to put in a new computer system for the agency and also work with its homeless clients to improve their technological skills and access.

"People are always looking for ways to help, to do something," said Joseph Wall, the company's president, in explaining why businesses have become more involved. "We're so busy and we're so challenged that people don't know how they can participate. And I think the average person really wants to participate."

Last Thursday, many of the people serving lunch to the homeless for Bethesda Cares were employees of Fenestra Technologies Corp., a Germantown software and Web development firm. Rick Rogers, the company's president, explained his firm's interest this way: "We work with computers all day long," he said. "It's important for us to get a perspective of the whole community that we live in."

Rogers said he and his staff work at the soup kitchen once every three months. They were matched with Bethesda Cares by the Corporate Volunteer Council of Montgomery County. The outing, he said, has other benefits for the company. "It's also really good for us to come out and do something as a team and interact with each other in a way that we wouldn't normally."

Yet individual volunteers remain the core of Bethesda Cares; people such as Len Kirsten, a retired deli owner and Smithsonian employee who drops by to help serve lunch at least a couple times a month.

Kirsten, of Bethesda, said the importance of volunteering was instilled in him by his grandparents, Russian Jewish immigrants who lived frugally but gave generously.

"You just can't keep taking from society," he said. "You've got to give back. I don't have huge amounts of money to give, but I have my time and effort, and I give that."

## Active Volunteers

Retirees such as Kirsten are a cornerstone of the county's volunteer efforts: At the Colesville Meals on Wheels, most of the work is done by people who left their careers years ago.

Alan and Becky Hedin, longtime Colesville residents, are a husband-and-wife team who give their services at least once a week.

Alan Hedin, a retired NASA scientist, is the group's president. He has been helping to deliver meals for five years, ever since he stopped working at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, where he specialized in the science of the upper atmosphere. Becky Hedin was a volunteer when the organization was launched in the 1970s, and then stopped for a while when she went back to work as a nursery school director. She resumed when she retired a few years ago.

They are among 180 people listed as volunteers on the agency's roster, though only about half of those make up the core group of the most active. They take turns delivering 60 meals a day to the needy in their community. The organization pays Holy Cross Hospital to provide the meals.

Becky Hedin said she remembers when there used to be many more stay-at-home mothers who volunteered.

"We can always use more volunteers," her husband said as they rode in their green Subaru station wagon, making the rounds last week. "Especially regulars. But substitutes are wonderful, too."

Asked why he started delivering meals, Alan Hedin laughed. "To keep busy," he joked from the front seat.

His wife turned to him and gently nudged. "Meals on Wheels provided a great service for your parents in Minnesota," she reminded him.

He nodded. "I guess that was the primary reason for selecting this program over other programs," he said.

The car came to a stop. He got out, opened the back door of the station wagon, and pulled out two meals. One hot and one cold.

And he walked up the steps and knocked on the door to give something back.

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