

A cornucopia of giving

There's no shortage of Thanksgiving Day volunteers at The Soup Kitchen

By **LOUISE WREGE**
HP Staff Writer

BENTON HARBOR — As many families celebrate Thanksgiving today with loved ones, in many ways it's just another day at The Soup Kitchen in Benton Harbor, said Executive Director Merry Stover.

"We do make a little effort to make it a holiday meal," she said.

Stover said most of the regulars still come to The Soup Kitchen on Thanksgiving.

"For some people, it's the only meal they get in the day."

She said that most years, volunteers from Lake Michigan College in Benton Township cook the turkeys in the college's large oven, which can cook up to 16 turkeys at one time. This year, she said, culinary students took the meat off the bones before sending it to her organization.

"The Soup Kitchen works because everybody does a little bit," she said.

Plenty of volunteers

Stover said finding volunteers is not a problem on Thanksgiving Day. In fact, she said she has to turn people away.

"We usually get around 200 people calling to help," she said. "Some people work and want to help while they're off. Some people think you're really going to need the help on Thanksgiving. Some people think they're making a sacrifice."



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MERRY STOVER
The Soup Kitchen executive director

And she said some people want to help on a holiday because they want to forget.

"One lady wants to help because her husband just died, and she wants to take her mind off of him," she said.



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

TOP: Frank Johnson, of Benton Harbor, enjoys a lunch with his son, Xavier Johnson, 5, Wednesday at the Soup Kitchen in Benton Harbor. **ABOVE:** Stephanie Kline, of St. Joseph, helps serve turkey dinners Tuesday during a community Thanksgiving Meal held at Overflow Church in Benton Harbor.

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Needs of the homeless never go away

By **LOUISE WREGE**
HP Staff Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Emergency Shelter Service provides more than temporary housing for homeless families, said Tracy-Ann Jennings, the new executive director.



JENNINGS

She said the nonprofit organization provides services to help keep people from becoming homeless in the first place through The Connection.

"When residents come in they are linked up with a case manager, who does assessments, who is able to assist them, who is helping them set goals and then they work towards their goals," she said.

Those goals often include finding a job or affordable housing or securing benefits through agencies they qualify for.

She said her agency works with several other organizations to keep people in their homes, including the Housing Resource Network.

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THANKSGIVING

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Wednesday's Soup Kitchen volunteers were from Our Lady Queen of Peace in Bridgman.

Vickie Toner of St. Joseph said she and her husband, Kerry Toner, started volunteering once a month about a year ago after she retired.

"I just thought it was a genuine courtesy we could extend to people – a hot meal and a friendly hello," she said.

Frank Johnson of Benton Harbor said he is thankful for The Soup Kitchen.

"It's a place where you come, you know everybody and you get a nice hot meal," he said.

On Wednesday, he was there with his 5-year-old son, Exavier Johnson. And he said they both would be back today for a meal.

"Benton Harbor has a lot of homeless people (for being) so little," he said. "These meals are very important."

Celebrating early

Overflow Church in Benton Township celebrated the holiday Tuesday with its third annual Community Thanksgiving Meal.

"This year, we're already busting at the seams," said Pastor J. Scott Samarco, youth and local outreach pastor, shortly before the food was served.

And they kept coming.

"Our heart behind this Thanksgiving event isn't just to meet a need but to make new friends by sharing a meal with all people," said the Rev. Brian Bennett, lead pastor. "We don't just do this 'for' the community. We do it 'with' as an act of love and hospitality."

Bennett's wife, Cindy Bennett, said about 40 people broke bread together the first year. That number grew to 300 by the second year. On Tuesday, she estimated there were 400



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Hundreds of people gather for a community Thanksgiving meal Tuesday at Overflow Church in Benton Harbor.

people sharing the meal together who were served by more than 80 volunteers.

"It's wonderful seeing people use all their gifts for the Kingdom," she said.

Helping the homeless

Overflow Church provided transportation so almost 30 clients from an emergency shelter run by Emergency Shelter Services in Benton Harbor could attend, said Executive Director Tracy-Ann Jennings.

"Yesterday was very important to me as far as trying to get a chance to connect with some of the shelter residents," said Jennings, who took over as executive director Oct. 5. "When you think of Thanksgiving, you think of a time of reflection, a time of thanks and a time of connecting. ... I can think of no better way to bond and connect with individuals than over a good meal."

Cindy Bennett said an anonymous donor paid for a heated tent to be rented to seat 75 more people.

"For some of these families, this is their only Thanksgiving meal together



Volunteers Ilse Klinkhamer, left, and Vickie Toner serve lunch Wednesday at the Soup Kitchen in downtown Benton Harbor.

er because mom or dad have to work on Thanksgiving," she said.

She said volunteers cooked 30 turkeys and more than 60 side dishes.

Learning to serve

Among the volunteers were almost 30 middle and high school students from Overflow Student Ministries serving the food sit-down style, Samarco said.

"It's important for them to understand what it means to serve," he said. "It's an opportunity to see God's heart at work."

Live music was provided by Alison Brook, Laura Whitten and Mark Cox, he said.

Samarco said church officials may need to look for a new venue with a larger kitchen for next year's Community Thanksgiving Meal, which will be Nov. 22, 2016.

"This is a huge blessing in the community to meet some needs and build some relationships," he said.

He said Overflow Church wants to be known as the most loving church in the area.

"We believe as we focus on that, people can experience love through outreach and shared stories so they can experience God's love," he said.

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