

# In Somerset, support for the needy

**Despite economic downturn, Thanksgiving dinners are planned**

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For agencies assisting the hungry, displaced and poor in Somerset County, the times are always hard.

But even during an economic slump, community support is helping the Food Bank Network and the Samaritan Homeless Interim Program to hold their annual Thanksgiving dinners.

More will be needed, though, especially as the programs look to an increased need for services through the holidays and beyond.

"We're being hit extremely hard, especially by people coming in for food," said Tom O'Leary, SHIP's executive director. "There's not a spot open in the soup kitchen" at St. John's Episcopal Church in Somerville, where attendance has roughly doubled to about 130 a meal, he said.

But the situation was worse a few weeks ago, before a food drive in Hillsborough schools helped restock the pantry, he said. With SHIP's annual Thanksgiving dinner coming next week, **Temple Sholom in Bridgewater** did a more specialized drive to provide turkeys.

Yams, cranberry sauce, soda and similar side items are still welcome, as are clothes from socks and underwear to coats, shirts and jeans to help meet other needs.

SHIP runs a wide variety of programs, including a mobile soup kitchen, emergency meal vouchers, street outreach services, HIV testing and counseling, and substance abuse counseling. Many rely largely or entirely upon donations.

While the poor economy may reduce some of that support, it probably won't change where it's coming from, O'Leary said.

"Those that give, give and those that don't, don't," he said. "So that hasn't changed. It's the ones who have been without who give."

The Food Bank Network operates from four locations in Somerset County: its main warehouse at Middlebrook Crossroads Industrial Park in Bridgewater, 9E Easy St., off Chimney Rock Road; Hope Church, 519 E. Main St., Bound Brook; the United Reformed Church, 100 W. Main St., Somerville; and the Vermeule Community Center, corner of Greenbrook Road and Clinton Avenue, North Plainfield.

The food bank is putting on its annual Thanksgiving dinner on Sunday afternoon at the People Care Center in Bridgewater. With a late surge in donations, "I think we're going to get through Thanksgiving," said Executive Director Marie Scannell.

But demand continues for services beyond special events, and the food bank offers services beyond basic supplies. Among other things, it offers prescription assistance for qualified individuals, "working wardrobes" for those looking for or getting jobs, pediatric dental care for children on low-income families in the county.

"We're going to need help for Christmas, that's going to be a hard one," Scannell said.

The poor economy "is not good for donors as well as for people who need our help," Scannell said. Even past aid recipients who have gotten back on their feet have found the local outlook grim, she said. Some she numbered among her success stories "have left the area," she said. "They couldn't afford it."