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Needing help – but still giving thanks

Many local families face a difficult holiday for the first time

By [ELISHA SAUERS](#) Staff Writer

Shavon and Vince Scott stood in a line earlier this week to pick up their Thanksgiving turkey, gravy, stuffing and cranberry sauce. But for the first time, the Annapolis couple raising two young boys waited on the sidewalk in front of the Light House homeless shelter on West Street, rather than in a supermarket checkout aisle.

They were among nearly 180 families - almost twice as many as last year - who received a Thanksgiving food basket from the shelter.

The Scotts initially experienced the recession firsthand when Mrs. Scott lost her job at the county Department of Aging about seven months ago, she said. Since then, Mr. Scott has struggled to support the family solely with his paycheck from the state Board of Elections.

"It's been really hard, especially with just one income," Mrs. Scott said. "This is our first time ever coming here for this."

Despite a cornucopia of reasons to be disheartened about the holiday season this year, many of the families who have lost jobs, homes and possessions are contemplating this Thanksgiving Day with even more appreciation for the things they still have to be grateful for.

The Scotts smiled and wished others well as they packed the trunk of a minivan with the donated foodstuffs. "We're really thankful we have each other," Mrs. Scott said.

Holiday hardships

The Scott family is just one of many facing hardships this holiday. In the most recent tally of unemployment in Anne Arundel County, nearly 18,000 residents were without work, amounting to a 6.5 percent jobless rate.

Though the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation won't release last month's local labor statistics until the beginning of next week, if the numbers trend with the statewide rate - Maryland increased one-tenth of a percentage point to 7.3 percent in October - that figure is most likely an underestimation of the current jobless situation for this area.

Last November, in the beginning stages of the economic downturn, the county had just 4.5 percent unemployment. Before the recession, the rate for this time of year usually fell between 3 and 3.5 percent.

These difficult financial times have obscured the traditional definition of middle-class America. When food pantries aren't just catering to households in poverty or the chronically homeless, the meaning of those economic terms changes, charity employees have said.

Howard Dunkley, the Light House program manager, said the local Salvation Army was so overwhelmed with requests from new families qualifying to participate in the organization's Thanksgiving program this year that the Light House ended up providing baskets to many of the households overflowing its list.

But even though the shelter received enough donations to put together more baskets this year than last, the shelter eventually reached the limits of how much it could provide.

"We got calls from more than 200 (families)," Dunkley said. "It was way over, and so we had to cut the list."

Bruce Michalec, executive director of the Anne Arundel County Food Bank, said about 30 percent of the clients who received emergency food from local pantries this year are first-timers.

And though many charitable groups require that recipients provide proof they fall below the poverty line or meet Department of Social Services criteria as a household in need, Michalec said he doesn't ask clients questions because he knows emergency situations are occurring more frequently in all income brackets.

"There are a lot of people who would be disqualified - you can tell just by the cars they drive here," he said. "I can see and hear it in their voices that these are new people who have never been in trouble before. They could live in a million-dollar home and find themselves in an emergency."

Record foreclosures

Indeed, there are some families living in million-dollar homes who have recently found their financial situations compromised.

The county has seen nearly 2,300 foreclosure filings for the year to date, and Circuit Court Clerk Robert P. Duckworth believes that 2009 will conclude with an all-time high of 3,000 cases in local courts.

The increase in home foreclosures augurs that, for many families, Thanksgiving dinner won't be held in the same dining room it was last year.

Urana Kush, a Chicagoan, is having Thanksgiving in Annapolis with her adult daughter this year, but her travels to the East Coast aren't just for a visit.

Kush, a former real estate agent, said her Midwestern townhouse is in the midst of the foreclosure process right now.

"I'm losing a home," she said as her eyes welled with tears.

Faced with the need to find a new housing situation, she chose to uproot and move closer to family members. For the past few weeks, she's been renting in Annapolis.

"You know, I was getting really depressed and I didn't really go out a lot," Kush said. "I'm thankful I'm closer to family now. I can't really complain. Things have to get better."