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Thanksgiving a time for community outreach for local nonprofits, agencies

Writer:

Dorothy Atkins

Byline:

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

While those with family and friends spend the holiday cooking and chowing down together, local governmental agencies and nonprofits are doing what they can to make sure no one is left hungry over Thanksgiving.

The Aspen Homeless Shelter is hosting a small afternoon Thanksgiving dinner for about 20 of the shelter's regulars, said Vince Savage, director of the homeless shelter.

The Maroon Creek Club, the Clean Energy Collective and Aspen Country Day School donate dry goods and turkeys to the shelter for the holiday, Savage said.

Although the shelter is open to anyone in need, Savage discouraged the public from dropping in for a free meal.

"We are, I would say, closed to the public," said Savage. "It's really for those people who are generally our regular guests."

The day center, located in the Pitkin County health and human services building across from the Aspen Valley Hospital, offers a place to stay and eat to the homeless between 9 a.m. and 8:45 p.m. daily. In December, St. Mary's Catholic Church will open nightly through the end of March, providing those without homes a warm place to sleep.

Administrators at the shelters do what they can to make the day special for the guests, but the Thanksgiving meal primarily relies on donations from people and groups in the Aspen community, said Savage.

"One of the things we do here is try to provide a certain amount of camaraderie around the people we help," said Savage. That is what he hopes the meal will do for the homeless.

Meanwhile, Pitkin County Jail will offer a traditional Thanksgiving lunch for the 11 or so inmates who are locked up over the holiday.

Each year, Aspen Valley Hospital makes a Thanksgiving meal for the jail inmates with the choice of pumpkin or pecan pie to top it off. The meal is usually the extent of the celebration.

"We try to keep it light," said Jim DeBerge, jail deputy, adding that they keep the communal televisions on football games all day. "But we do more special things around Christmas time. [Thanksgiving] is usually a more quiet day in general."

In addition to the meals at the jail and shelter, the Aspen Senior Center offered its annual Thanksgiving lunch made by Little Annie's Eating House on Wednesday, which was open to the public.

There were two seatings, one at 11:30 a.m. and one at 1:15 p.m., each with 70 spots for hungry guests. Both seatings were fully reserved by Tuesday evening.

The event has become so popular that the center ends up having to turn away those without a reservation, said Ruth Hostetler, administrative assistant at the center.

"I always warn people that we fill up and they need to make a reservation," said Hostetler. "But, when it comes down to it, we still always get people coming in on the day of the lunch trying to get a meal."

dorothy@aspendailynews.com [1]

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Kent "Captain" Bigalow volunteers at the Pitkin County Senior Center during the annual Thanksgiving Eve meal. Little Annie's has been quietly donating the food, along with staff members who volunteer, for the past 24 years as a way to give back to the community. This year's lunch included two seatings for almost 160 seniors.

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