

The winter holiday season is upon us and I would like to extend warm wishes to everyone in Southern Maryland to have a safe and happy holiday. This is a time when we celebrate the warm traditions of the holidays with loved ones – families reunite, gifts are shared, many people partake in preparing and enjoying lavish meals, and make plans to attend parties and gatherings to celebrate the season.

With all of the cooking, decorating, entertaining and traveling, it is also important to keep in mind those who may not have the same abundant opportunities as well as those who are suffering or grieving instead of celebrating this joyous season, and ways that we Marylanders can help make the season a little easier for some of our neighbors.

Local charities this year are reporting an increased need for goods and services as the cost of living rises . With home values dropping and the costs of health care, home heating oil and a college education continuing to rise, American families are justifiably uneasy about their ability to make ends meet in a declining economy.

with families findnigon climbing energy prices, healthcare s up and more families are finding it harder along with the rising costs of Local charities are reporting increased needs among people in the community for goods and services as the cost of living rises on the back of higher fuel costs and the national credit crunch begins to be felt locally. More families find themselves unable to make ends meet, so the demand on charities for food and other necessities is rising.

Fortunately, thanks to our strong community spirit and our faith in Southern Maryland's future, many Southern Marylanders have made sure their holiday to-do lists include doing something to spread the joy of the holiday season to others, whether it is reaching out to the needy, making sure that all children have a gift to open, or preparing and delivering meals to the elderly and disabled. If you haven't already, I encourage you to review the philanthropic opportunities listed below and take some time to make a monetary gift, donate your some of your own possessions, or volunteer for one or more of these worthwhile causes to strengthen our communities, and support our neighbors.

According to the Maryland Food Bank, the only food bank serving the entire state and an affiliate of America's Second Harvest, there are 50,000 people in Maryland each week relying on emergency food programs - food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters - to put food on the table for their families. More than one third are children and elderly.

The Maryland Food Bank supports a network of more than 1,000 food providers throughout the state, and you can donate food or dollars to enable the Food Bank to get more food to more people more often. For more information about making a donation or volunteering your time, you can visit their website at [<http://www.mdfoodbank.org>] or call 410-737-8282

Likewise, many of our neighbors are in need of things like clothing, appliances and furniture. If you have these types of items, you can donate them to the Goodwill Industries of the Chesapeake, and you can find a location near you at [<http://www.goodwillches.org/content.php?page=41>]. Goodwill uses the revenue from their stores to help fund programs that give people the job training and other career services they need to be successful in the workplace. In 2003, Goodwill provided employment and training services to 616,830 people nationwide.

The Salvation Army also has a holiday “Sharing is Caring” drive for donations which enables them to bring the spirit of the season to those who would otherwise be forgotten. Donations enable them to provide holiday dinners, clothing, and toys for families in need. Financial assistance also helps with basic necessities, along with seasonal aid. Volunteers distribute gifts to shut-ins in hospitals and nursing homes and the families of prisoners, and shelters are open for sit-down dinners. More information can be found at [<http://www.salvationarmyusa.org>].

The U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program collects new, unwrapped toys during October, November and December each year and distributes those toys as gifts to needy children in the community in which the campaign is conducted. To find a toy drive in your community, visit [<http://www.toysfortots.org/donate/toys.asp>].

Finally, HelpingMaryland.org [www.helpingmaryland.org] is a web-based initiative to boost philanthropy and volunteerism in the state of Maryland where you can find the wide range of volunteer opportunities and donations needed by local organizations.

We especially remember the men and women serving overseas in the military, and their families during the holidays. There are a number of ways you can show support to servicemembers and their families which can be found at the United Service Organizations (USO) [www.uso.org]. If you have taken some time this holiday season to help your neighbors, thank you. Your efforts are surely making a difference for those who may not otherwise have much to look forward to this season. And, if you are still looking for something to do, there are a few days left to pitch in and bring some joy to your neighbors by sharing your time, talents and compassion with your community.

