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## Program Provides Relief For Homeless In Winter Months



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**Charity Cummings serves as the director of Winter Relief and has been with Arundel House of Hope for eight years.**

PHOTOS BY JUDY TACYN



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### **By Judy Tacyn**

Arundel House of Hope – in conjunction with dozens of churches throughout the county – provides shelter to homeless individuals through the Winter Relief program that takes place from October through March.

“If not for this program, guests would be sleeping outside during the coldest seasons of the year,” said Bob Svehlak, Winter Relief ministry coordinator at St. John the Evangelist Church in Severna Park, one of the program’s partner churches.

Charity Cummings, director of Winter Relief, has been with Arundel House of Hope for eight years. She acknowledges shelters in the area are usually full, and there are still segments of the homeless population that need assistance. Cummings works with the more than 70 church affiliates to make sure there is a warm place for dozens of homeless people to eat and sleep over the winter months.

Carlton, a homeless participant in Winter Relief, hopes that he won't be reliant on the program for too much longer.

"I am so thankful for this program, but I don't plan on being here forever," Carlton said. "I am working to get back on my feet and back to my son."

Folks interested in getting relief from the harsh realities of being homeless in the winter must go through a screening process with the Department of Social Services. Approved applicants are referred to Arundel House of Hope's Winter Relief program, where the waiting list can be lengthy. Once accepted, participants are tested for drug and alcohol use daily.

According to John McLaughlin, director of operations at Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church, the Severna Park church has been participating in Winter Relief for more than 20 years. McLaughlin said part of his organization's mission is to serve the community, and Winter Relief gives his church an opportunity to do just that.

"It gives all of us and our volunteers a sense of purpose to serve people who are not as fortunate," McLaughlin said.

Woods is slated to host homeless guests in March. Though Woods is in the early planning stages, McLaughlin said guests can expect some great Irish food and entertainment for St. Patrick's Day.

St. John the Evangelist Church has participated in Winter Relief for seven years. A typical day in the program includes meals and evening activities such as watching television, karaoke, bingo or talking with one another. Showers and laundry services are also available for the homeless guests during their stay.

"At St. John, we are just trying to do a bit of something to help others that aren't so lucky," Svehlak said. "I personally got involved in this ministry to better understand the folks using these services and to hopefully overcome my cynicism about what got them there."

Severna Park United Methodist Church has been a Winter Relief host church since 2012, and due to its size, usually hosts a week in November and a week in February. Although more than 1,000 guests have found comfort at Severna Park United Methodist, Carolyn Heim, director of Winter Relief at the church, said she believes volunteers may benefit more than the guests.

"It takes more than 1,300 volunteer hours and 200 volunteers each Winter Relief week," Heim said. "It is a much-desired program because people can do mission work without leaving the state or country. There is a lot of joy, and a lot of smiles when we can serve God by helping people."

Homeless guests at St. John the Evangelist Church were treated to crab cakes, baked fish and hush puppies on New Year's Eve.

"I haven't had crab cakes in years, and these are really good," said one guest, Tyler. "If it wasn't for this program, I'd be outside begging for my meal and not knowing where I'd be sleeping."

Cummings said the churches and volunteers she works with are amazing, and that guests love the hot meals, entertainment and warm spots to lay their heads. She added that many of the homeless population they work with have made mistakes, but they just need assistance to get back on their feet.

“At House of Hope, we do the best we can to help the vulnerable people in our community,” Cummings said. “We don’t look down on them but help them up to get them out of their situation. When I go to bed at night it breaks my heart to know so many people are sleeping outside. How can I not help?”

Arundel House of Hope accepts year-round donations of blankets, pillows, winter clothing, hygiene items, cash and gift cards. Cummings said she’s always looking for more churches, because more churches mean more people are not sleeping outside. To donate or to inquire about getting involved as a volunteer or host church, contact Charity Cummings at 410-863-4888.

## Comments

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