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## Area Houses Of Worship Provide Winter Respite



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**Volunteers from Severna Park United Methodist Church served meals, provided entertainment, washed laundry, and lent helping hands in many other ways in early November 2023 when their church hosted people experiencing homelessness through the Winter Relief program. SPUMC is welcoming guests again mid-February.**

PHOTO PROVIDED

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## **By Meredith Winter**

Fresh haircuts, hot showers, crabcakes on New Year's Eve, dental cleanings and s'mores around a bonfire are among the many ways that Severna Park area houses of worship are helping community members experiencing homelessness to feel special and loved this winter.

Since 1992, churches and synagogues around the county have partnered with the Arundel House of Hope to provide shelter for local individuals experiencing homelessness throughout the winter months. The program, known as Winter Relief, runs late October through March and is designed to not only provide respite from harsh weather conditions but also help guests experience the love of God and others in simple and practical ways.

Religious facilities are transformed into temporary shelters for one week at a time, and congregations come together to serve the guests while showing them dignity and care. Hundreds of volunteers at each facility give their time and resources to prepare and serve meals, wash laundry, spend time with guests, provide entertainment and more.

This winter, six churches and one synagogue in Severna Park and Arnold are participating in Winter Relief. Guests will be ministered to not only physically, but also spiritually, as they are typically invited to weekend services and are cared for on a personal level by church leaders and volunteers.

Carolyn Heim, who has attended Severna Park United Methodist Church since 1987, shared that she was instrumental in getting her church involved with Winter Relief beginning in 2012. She serves as SPUMC's Winter Relief site coordinator, this year organizing over 200 volunteers to serve guests for two weeks.

In early November, 24 guests shared hot meals with SPUMC hosts, played bingo, and roasted marshmallows around a bonfire. Heim explained that her church also makes it a point to provide haircuts, a shower trailer and professional dental cleanings for their guests, many of whom might otherwise not have access to such basic necessities. An associate pastor even blesses guests with manicures.

"The biggest thing our church and our volunteers do is they show the love of God," Heim said. "They're showing it with their hands, feet and heart."

SPUMC will again welcome Winter Relief guests in mid-February, and volunteers are looking forward to treating them to an ice cream social.

This year, as in years past, the congregation at Temple Beth Shalom volunteered to host Winter Relief for the week of Christmas in an effort to serve not only their guests but also area churches so they could devote the week to celebrating the birth of Christ. Site coordinator Jodi Meisenberg explained that this is just one of the ways participating houses of worship collaborate.

"We work together. We volunteers get to know the volunteers at other sites. We help each other out whenever we can," she said. "We become friends."

Meisenberg spoke to the impact the week has on the roughly 100 members of her congregation who come together to make it happen. One faithful volunteer sets up a card table each night and plays with the guests for hours. Although it is a joy to serve, it can also be difficult to close out the week. "For us, the volunteers, to have this concentrated intense time with the guests, it's a very emotional experience to help them through the week, to get to know their stories, and then to just as abruptly say goodbye knowing the daily challenges they face," Meisenberg said.

For many of the years Temple Beth Shalom has participated since coming alongside Arundel House of Hope in 2012, Anne Arundel County and Annapolis' observation of The Longest Night memorial service has fallen during or immediately before the temple's week to host Winter Relief. The annual ceremony, held on December 21, remembers those in the community who have lost their lives due to homelessness. Meisenberg shared the sobering statistic that every year, at least one of the names read during the ceremony is recognized as a Winter Relief guest from years past, a testament to the severe hardships they endure.

The day after Christmas 2023, Winter Relief guests transitioned from Temple Beth Shalom a few miles up Ritchie Highway to St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church. Volunteer site coordinator Bob Svehlak, who has spearheaded the parish's involvement with Winter Relief the last eight of his nearly 30 years attending, shared that the week represents the parish's largest annual volunteer effort and brings together over 200 people eager to serve. Among them are scores of school children who bless the guests by preparing bagged lunches for them each day.

The 31 men and women staying at St. John the Evangelist this winter rang in 2024 with a New Year's Eve feast of crabcakes, ribs, barbecue chicken and various accompaniments before watching the ball drop on TV.

Svehlak demonstrated that his fellow parishioners, among other participating congregations, experience the words of Jesus that "it is more blessed to give than receive." He shared, "The highlight in general that I hear from our parish is that they're glad they can do something to help these folks. There's really a sense of gratification ... (and) reward from helping someone else."

Other area churches participating in Winter Relief this year include Broadneck Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Our Shepherd Lutheran Church, Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church and St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church.

To learn more about the program, as well as other services provided by Arundel House of Hope, go to [www.arundelhoh.org](http://www.arundelhoh.org) (<http://www.arundelhoh.org>).

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