

Holiday donations benefit Alamance County food bank

Maggie Brown

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Allied Churches of Alamance County (ACAC) is the largest feeding program in the county, located less than 5 miles from Elon University's campus. Their goal is to improve the community by helping residents find housing and secure meals.

Originally, ACAC began as a core group of churches pooling its resources to serve community better. But today, ACAC acts as its own nonprofit funded by more than 100 churches in the local community.

During the holiday season, ACAC supports its residents through a program called Honor Cards. ACAC promotes awareness by selling their own holiday cards that have a unique design on them and are something community members can send to their friends and family during the holiday season.

Many churches and ministries in the community, such as Greensboro Urban Ministry, will have these cards available for purchase. Support from fundraisers like this is what keeps many different programs in ACAC funded through the holiday season.

"We have so many programs relying on holiday cards," said Caitlin Vatikiotis-Bateson, ACAC's community relations director. "We have 'honor card ambassadors' and they will take them back to their church and sell them. It's amazing because I can't sell \$25,000 worth of honor cards."

One of the programs funded by these holiday cards is ACAC's community kitchen. The kitchen feeds hot meals to around 200 residents per day. Most of those seeking a meal are those whose monthly government benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can no longer support them.

The community kitchen is open for lunch and dinner five days a week. One of the kitchen staff employees, Willie Warren, is a proud resident of Burlington an employee of the ACAC.

"One time I used to go through this line," Warren said.

ACAC does not act alone. They are not only by being supported by hundreds of churches in the community, but also by Elon. Elon Dining partners with the ACAC to make sure they have meals to provide to residents even more during the holidays. Just last week, they donated leftovers from the Thanksgiving meals.

"This chicken came from Elon cafeteria," Warren said. "Every Wednesday they bring us food like salads, fresh vegetables."

The community kitchen receives most of its food either from donations or from their food bank. Because the ACAC receives their food from a food bank, they are able to get supplies for sometimes 19 cents a pound.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

- Food insecurity is a lack of guaranteed access to regular meals
- Food insecurity can also refer to reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet
- The United States Department of Agriculture recognizes four levels of food insecurity, from low to high

"We can go to the food bank so our dollar goes further," Vatikiotis-Bateson said.

The ACAC encourages monetary donations during this holiday season over food donations. While all donations are appreciated, there is more of a monetary need when addressing the issue of hunger.

"Right now the support from the community is huge," Vatikiotis-Bateson said. "We have so many food drives happening and people coming in. We are getting more food than we can use."

In addition to the already abundant contributions from the community, Vatikiotis-Bateson is asking for donations of \$10-\$20 department store gift cards. She hopes those coming to the community kitchen will not be returners, but rather be able to economically support themselves enough to not come back.

"We have great relationships with lots of employers around," Vatikiotis-Bateson said. "But if our resident gets a job in the manufacturing industry and doesn't have a pair of shoes, we can't buy them for him without the proper funds."

By providing residents with gift cards, residents are able to purchase supplies they may need for a job. If they are able to maintain this job because they have the right equipment, then they will not need to return to the ACAC's kitchen.



RIGHT NOW THE SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY IS HUGE. WE HAVE SO MANY FOOD DRIVES HAPPENING AND PEOPLE COMING IN. WE ARE GETTING MORE FOOD THAN WE CAN USE.

CAITLIN VATIKIOTIS-BATESON
ACAC'S COMMUNITY RELATIONS
DIRECTOR

Issues of housing and hunger are directly related. And though it would make sense to feed the hungry all the time, the ACAC recognizes hunger stems from a larger, economic problem.

According to Feeding America, 78 percent of the residents in Alamance County are below the guidelines for SNAP. The food insecurity rate is 15.7 percent, where nationally, low rates are from 5 to 10 percent and high rates are in the upper 20s.

Senior Meredith Piatt is a student intern at ACAC and has been a resident of Burlington her whole life. She is



MAGGIE BROWN | ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR
Senior Meredith Piatt at the Allied Churches of Alamance County gets ready to serve lunch.

FOOD INSECURITY IN ALAMANCE COUNTY

\$2.90

Average weekly dollar amount food-secure individuals report spending on each meal.

24,200

Number of food insecure people in Alamance County



\$23,550

The current federal poverty level for a family of four. The level is \$19,530 for a family of three.

8,560

Number of children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

passionate about how housing has affected the hunger in Alamance County.

"Issues of housing can include issues of unemployment or issues of discrimination," Piatt said. "Donating stuff really helps people get on their feet, but the real background to everything is that people need housing and help."

Many in the community believe there is an increased need in the holiday season because more people are donating. But the ACAC is asking for a consistent number of donations that don't fluctuate during the seasons.

"The goal is to get people out as quickly as possible, so we aren't proud to have people," Piatt said. "A perspective of community members and also students is that during the holiday season there is an increased need. There isn't. There is a consistent need for donations."

Because ACAC partners with Elon Volunteers (EV), many of the volunteers are lost during Elon's breaks. The holidays are where the ACAC has a lack of volunteers and is looking for more help. But mostly, the needs in the holiday season are consistent with the needs throughout the year.

"We work really close with Elon, and Elon gives us a lot of support, but we always need volunteers because there is always something happening at the shelter," Vatikiotis-Bateson said.

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