

**HEADLINE:** For local nonprofits, a season of receiving

**BYLINE:** Julie Lynem

**BODY:**

For San Luis Obispo County nonprofits, this holiday season could be a good one for giving.

The weeks between Thanksgiving and the new year are a high point for such organizations that depend on local businesses and individuals for cash, food, gifts, clothing and other essentials. And this year, agencies say, donors appear to be in a generous mood.

"We've seen lots of people looking for ways to give money, time and hours," said Charlotte Alexander, executive director of United Way of San Luis Obispo County.

"There's a lot of momentum. We're seeing more people moving to this county who tend to be wealthier. And they know that if they want the county to continue to be paradise and have the high quality of life that they enjoy, they will have to support people who do not have what they have."

While no one knows exactly how much cash or non-monetary contributions the county's estimated 1,000 nonprofits receive during the holidays, some nonprofits report that nearly half of their donations arrive at this time of year.

Elizabeth Steinberg, executive director of the Economic Opportunity Commission of San Luis Obispo County, said the organization receives about 40 percent of its donations from about Nov. 5 through Jan. 5. Last year, the organization brought in more than \$72,000 during that period for the Maxine Lewis Shelter, Prado Day Center, senior health screening program and other services offered by the EOC. Donations range from \$4 to \$2,500, she said. The EOC is counting on just as many contributions this year.

"In all of these years, we've managed to continue offering services to homeless families, the elderly and children," she said. "We (nonprofits) are a strong-knit community, and we work closely together to refer a donor to an area that they are more connected with."

**Bountiful gifts**

Indeed, local nonprofits say San Luis Obispo County residents are answering the call.

The United Way does not raise money specifically for the holidays, but the nonprofit's Above and Beyond campaign, which lasts from Nov. 1 through Dec. 31, is going strong. The local chapter recently received a \$50,000 donation from an anonymous donor, who will match that amount if the agency receives funding from new donors, Alexander said. The agency has already raised about \$6,000 toward the \$50,000 in matching funds.

At the Women's Shelter of San Luis Obispo, volunteer coordinator Beth Raub said they were able to assemble the 75 Thanksgiving food boxes needed to feed women and children who have fled abusive homes. As well, the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant gave the organization \$1,000 to buy turkeys and other food items, she said.

"Our donors seem to be coming through for us again," Raub said. "We even had some new groups approach us and do food drives, and some people are sending us checks for Thanksgiving to put in a (Christmas) holiday fund."

It's the same story for the **Food Bank** Coalition, which was able to supply about 2,000 turkeys and 1,000 hams to agencies that feed the hungry on Thanksgiving Day. One of the organization's donors, who had previously made a \$25,000 commitment to pay for

the turkeys and hams, had to back out, said Carl Hansen, executive director of the **Food Bank**.

The **Food Bank** turned to the public at large to fill in the gap, he said.

"People really are reaching out to those in need," said Hansen, noting that the **Food Bank** already has received 25 percent more cash and food than the previous year. "People understand that spirit of compassion during the holidays. It really is a time of abundance for nonprofits."

Hansen added: "Last year, with Hurricane Katrina, we thought people were really going to be donor-fatigued. But they responded to our needs, and we ended the year much better than we thought."

#### Uncertainty for some

But not all nonprofit agencies are as optimistic about charitable giving this year.

Kathleen O'Donnell, development officer for the San Luis Obispo County chapter of the American Red Cross, said the organization usually has its biggest gains during the holidays. However, O'Donnell fears that the slowdown in the housing market, global uncertainties and burnout from the Gulf Coast hurricanes in August 2005 and the tsunami of December 2004 may deter people from digging into their pockets for more.

"Our direct mail is not hitting its projections like we anticipated," she said. "We're focusing on a personal approach this year with individual donors."

It's imperative, she said, that people understand how the local chapter is funded. It does not receive funding from the national office, so all of the money used for disasters here at home must be raised in the community.

"People don't realize that we have to raise 100 percent of our budget," she said. Still, the Red Cross is hopeful that longtime, loyal donors will come through.

"We've had one donor who has issued a call to match her large donation, and we're hoping to get one or two others," said Grace McIntosh, director of the local chapter.

"There are a lot of loyal, smaller donors, and they're huge to us."

Steinberg of the Economic Opportunity Commission acknowledged that it's often the middle-income households that provide the bulk of nonprofit support. When those families are hurting financially, nonprofits feel it.

"It's the folks with their \$50 that are so needed," she said. "That's who donates to the Prado Day Center and Maxine Lewis shelter. Yes, we'll have some bigger donors, but the majority of those people who give money to those programs are really doing it \$50 at a time."

#### Donor connection

Whether it's close to home or in other parts of the country, giving as a whole has increased in the past 30 to 40 years, said Del Martin, vice chair of the Giving USA Foundation, which has tracked charitable giving in the United States since 1965.

The foundation's yearbook of philanthropy reported in June that Americans gave \$260 billion in contributions last year, up 6.1 percent from the previous year. Much of that giving was attributed to donations to assist with the major natural disasters in the U.S. and abroad between December 2004 and October 2005. Figures for 2006 will not be available until next summer. The foundation also does not keep statistics on holiday giving.

"Giving tends to increase more when there's a robust economy," Martin said. "Since nationally we're looking at a fairly good economy, all expectations are that giving will reflect that at the end of the year."

Martin added that donors give most when they "feel it's something important to give to" and that the money will be used wisely. It's a nonprofit's responsibility, she said, to make the case to donors that its cause is worthwhile.

"Nonprofits still have to get out there and make a connection with the donor," she said.

— Julie Lynem

### Smart Giving

If you're thinking about making a donation, here are a few things to consider:

- Don't give to a charity you're unfamiliar with, especially if it solicits you by phone or mail.
- Go to the charity's Web site, if it has one, to get an idea of what the organization does.
- Look up the charity's tax-exempt status. To find the IRS tax filing required of charities, known as 990s, use [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov).
- If a group is not registered on [charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org), ask the charity for a copy of the IRS letter confirming its tax-exempt status. A copy of a letter requesting IRS tax-exempt status is not enough, experts say.
- For larger charities, the Better Business Bureau at [www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org) or through [charitynavigator.com](http://charitynavigator.com) can provide useful information.
- Ask for a copy of the group's annual report, which is often available online. It has information about activities and how the group is governed. Think twice about a group that has significant overlap between staff members and the board.
- Look through local philanthropy catalogs, including [www.philanthropy.com](http://www.philanthropy.com).