



FRIEND,

With the holidays quickly approaching, many of us are devoting a great deal of time and effort to selecting gifts for the special people in our lives. We're in pursuit of nothing less than perfection — presents that show our recipients how much we love and care for them, how much they mean to us.

This is a wonderful tradition, of course. But let's be honest: There's a lot of pressure involved in identifying, acquiring, and giving meaningful gifts that will be truly cherished for months, if not years, after the wrapping paper and ribbons have been discarded.

So let me provide some reassurance: You can do it. I know this because you've been doing it all year, as is beautifully documented in this edition of Blessings.

You gave the gift of a new start in life to Ashley Owston and her four children. You gave the present of peace to a 14-year-old young man who is now, 10 years later, a U.S. Army sergeant dedicated to keeping us safe from harm. You gave thousands of Marylanders hot meals throughout the year. You gave these things and so much more in 2024, and every single one of your gifts is nothing less than perfect.

I know this not because of what exactly you gave or how much. I know it because of the why

behind your generosity. You answered the all-important call, yet again, to "Love Your Neighbor."

Mother Theresa said it better than I can: "It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving."

For all that do and give with love to help those in need throughout our state achieve their God-given potential I thank you. And on behalf of everyone here at Catholic Charities, I wish you and your loved ones a very merry Christmas and meaningful holiday season.

Bill
William J. McCarthy, Jr.,
Executive Director



WINTER 2024

BLESSINGS

CATHOLIC CHARITIES

CHERISHING THE DIVINE WITHIN ALL

Inspired by the Gospel mandates to LOVE, SERVE and TEACH, Catholic Charities provides care and services to IMPROVE the LIVES of Marylanders in need.



'We Never Turn a Person Away'

Our Daily Bread serves 200,000 warm meals every year, thanks to volunteers, donors, and, of course, Ms. Flo.

WHEN THE OUR DAILY BREAD EMPLOYMENT CENTER — operator of Maryland's largest free hot meal program — is short on either food to serve or volunteers to serve it, staffers barely blink an eye.

"Sometimes we have more than enough. Sometimes we have just enough. Sometimes we don't have enough," said Volunteer Manager Jasmine Jones. "We just put on our aprons and make it work."

Making it work sometimes requires the enlistment of men enrolled in the Christopher Place Employment Academy, the residential training and educational program for formerly homeless men. Without fail, they jump right in and perform whatever duties are needed.

"We take it as a challenge, like in the Food Network shows," said Florentina Coles, the manager of dining operations. "Regardless of



Ms. Flo

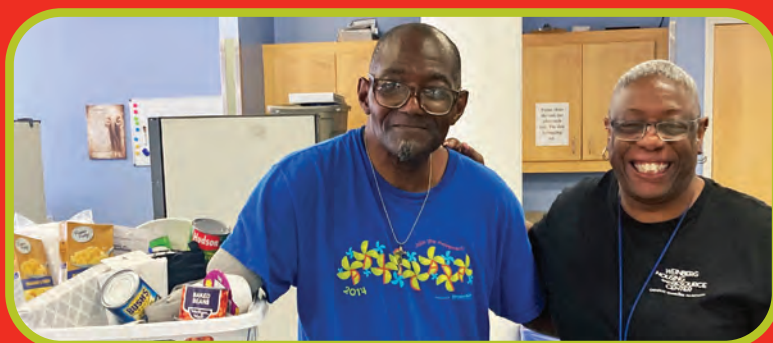
what happens over the course of the day, we never turn a person away."

FIVE-STAR EXPERIENCE

Our Daily Bread, which opened in 1981, offers "a very dignified experience" for nearly 400 people daily and 200,000 diners annually, said Coles, who is widely known as Ms. Flo. That includes a restaurant-quality meal — main course, garden salad, bread, dessert and drink — served on a freshly cleaned table by volunteers trained by Jones and her team, with jazz or classical music streaming in the background.

"It's really a joy," said Coles, who sometimes works more than 12 hours a day, starting at 6 a.m. "Nothing makes me happier *back* than to see someone sit down and enjoy a really good meal. It reminds me of what my grandmother used to do."

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Thanks to our generous donors, guests of the Weinberg Housing and Resource Center receive housewarming baskets full of useful items when they make the big move from the shelter into their own homes. After recently receiving his, William Brown (shown here with his case manager, Denise Dorsey) expressed his appreciation for all those who made the gift possible by answering the call to Love Your Neighbor.

From Financial Insecurity to National Security, Following Short Stay at Sarah's House

AS A U.S. ARMY SERGEANT TRAINED IN INTELLIGENCE, Caleb Johnson has the discipline to refrain from discussing his duties. During a recent conversation, the 24-year-old would reveal only one thing about his important work. "I really enjoy it," he said with a kind laugh.

While Caleb will not discuss details about his budding military career, he freely shares specifics about his challenging childhood, which was marked by poverty and periodic homelessness. He does so in hopes of inspiring those experiencing similar hardships. As he himself has demonstrated, it is possible, with a little help, to break the cycle of poverty and pursue even the loftiest of dreams.

A PEACEFUL PLACE TO PLAN

Just 10 years ago, Caleb's life appeared to be headed in a dire direction. His mother, struggling to maintain employment, constantly scrambled to find places to stay for her family of three — Caleb, Caleb's younger sister, and herself. For a time, they lived with relatives. Then with friends. Then acquaintances and even near-strangers. They also did some hotel hopping. Finally, Caleb's mother announced that they were moving into Sarah's House, Catholic Charities' emergency shelter and supportive housing program for families experiencing homelessness in Anne Arundel County.



Caleb Johnson

Fifteen years old at the time, Caleb was "super anxious" about the move and more than a little embarrassed that his classmates might discover his situation. But the benefits of Sarah's House quickly outweighed his concerns. For the first time, he experienced stability and structure in his life, which enabled him to switch from survival-mode thinking to long-term planning for the future.

"I had the opportunity to sit down, take a breather, and really start thinking about where I wanted it to go," Caleb said.

Caleb and his family stayed at Sarah's House for just three months, but the experience made a life-changing impact on everyone. Today, Caleb's sister lives in New York,

his mother lives in her own apartment about 20 minutes away from her son.

In addition to his military service, Caleb is attending college and volunteering for a number of organizations, including Sarah's House. He is particularly interested in mentoring young Black men like himself.

"My advice for them is to develop tunnel vision. There's where you are now, and where you want to go. Plan for that destination. Be patient and persevere," he said.

Organizations such as Sarah's House provide invaluable support and assistance, he said, but it is essential to remember that no program or person is going to get you out of poverty. They provide opportunities for participants to seize.

"I want everyone who's in the cycle of homelessness to know, I understand it's hard. The simplest things for most people, like making it to work on time or buying groceries, are sometimes impossible tasks. But there is a way out. It won't be overnight. It may not be comfortable, but I promise, if you make a plan and devote every day to getting closer to your goal, you will break this cycle," Caleb said. "Please do not give up. I promise with patience and dedication this moment will not last forever."

A New Home for the Holidays

WHILE ASHLEY OWSTON WAS LIVING IN HER CAR WITH FOUR CHILDREN, she was repeatedly told that no one could help her find shelter. The reason may seem unbelievable: she had too many kids.

"Everywhere I went, I hit a wall," she said. "Because of the size of my family, I was turned away from everywhere but Anna's House."

One of just two family shelters in Harford County, Anna's House offers various types of housing support and personalized assistance to families experiencing homelessness, with a goal of moving them into their own homes as quickly as possible.

When Anna's House staff heard of Ashley's family through Harford County's referral service, they reached out.

"Our units take four people. But what I said was, 'We won't say you can't come here. We can try to make some accommodations. We'll take you in,'" said Program Director Karyna Smith.

MOVING OUT OF SURVIVAL MODE

Ashley had lived on the streets for nine months before she arrived at Anna's House with kids who were 2, 6, 7 and 11. She was used to fighting hard for her family, advocating for them in every way possible, and the transition was challenging.

"My body just felt really restless because I was still in survival mode," she said. "It was hard to get out of the mind frame of everything that had just occurred. You know, it wasn't a pretty nine months."

Staff members first made sure the family was okay, that the children were in school and that all of them felt welcome at onsite activities, from preschool gatherings to nutrition classes. Then a case manager asked Ashley if she was ready to start looking for long-term housing. Her response: "Heck, yeah!"

Harford County's permanent supportive housing program is for the most vulnerable populations, including families that have been chronically homeless or have a household member with a diagnosed disability. The objective is to help them maintain long-term housing. But the scarcity of affordable housing in the area can make the process long and frustrating, even with support.

"IT FEELS LIKE HOME"

Ashley's family stayed at Anna's House for a year before they moved into their own place in July. That transition was hard, too. Her van was towed, the children's rambunctiousness challenged lease restrictions, and she retreated.

"I went back into that survival place, and it was kind of nasty for me for a little while," she said. "But now I've got it how I want it, and the kids have friends. It's nice. I can finally put my guard down, and it feels like home — everything that it should be."

As her first Christmas holiday season in the new home approaches, she is excited to decorate her own space.

"I'm going all out for everything this year — with what my finances will allow," she said. "But Dollar Tree is pretty good!"



The Owston Family

Catholic Charities Helps Seniors Connect to Available Benefits

NINE MILLION SENIOR CITIZENS ON LIMITED INCOMES IN THE UNITED STATES — including thousands of people in Maryland — are eligible but not enrolled in the benefits programs intended to help them afford food, health care and other daily expenses, according to the National Council on Aging.

The giant gap between eligibility and enrollment, which the president of the Council on Aging calls "shocking and unacceptable," raises obvious and important questions: Why aren't more seniors signed up for the benefits they're entitled to? And what can be done to connect more of them with the available assistance?

One major factor is an enrollment process that many older citizens find too difficult to complete on their own.

"Some of the primary challenges are navigating through the system. It can be pretty daunting," said Kevin Mason, program director of My Brother's Keeper, Catholic Charities' community-based resource center in West Baltimore. This is particularly true, he said, for those affected by unstable housing, food insecurity, substance use, psychosocial stressors, behavioral health issues, illiteracy and poverty.

To address the issue, My Brother's Keeper and many other Catholic Charities' programs provide seniors with a helping hand when it comes to enrollment. Such support can unlock the benefits for those in need.

"At first, I tried to do it myself online," April Johnson said of the benefits application, which she started following the unexpected loss of her job after 25 years. But when she proved unsuccessful on her own, a staffer at My Brother's Keeper provided the assistance

she needed. "It helped me to be able to get groceries," the West Baltimore resident said gratefully.

WIDESPREAD CHALLENGE

Such challenges are widespread in our state, according to the report by the National Council on Aging. In Maryland:

- 34.1 percent of those eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are enrolled;
- 42.7 percent of those eligible for Supplemental Security Income are enrolled; and
- 50.5 percent of those eligible for the Medicare Savings Program are enrolled.

For many older adults, these benefits are essential — lifelines that may prevent an empty refrigerator as food costs rise or enable consistent medical care as health challenges grow. They can also restore a sense of dignity for those who feel limited by a decreasing income, shrinking social circles and increasing isolation, enabling new choices in their lives.

But accessing the programs can feel impossible, especially for older adults wrestling with health and mobility challenges. Kevin Mason and his team often start by building connections, onsite as people come in for a meal or other service, at offsite events or through information tables in the lobbies of nearby senior-housing buildings. Trusting relationships allows staff to begin navigating clients through hurdles such as enrollment.

"It's really about helping people connect, even if it's through an activity or an event, because we can always backload resources," Mason said.



Dog Tired after Years of Amazing Service, Carmen to Retire

THERE WERE SIGNS that it was time to retire. She had slowed down a little at work. She was exhausted when she came home at night. And, even after cutting back to a four-day work week, she was still often in the office 10 hours a day or more. It was time for her to stop working like a dog — or at least like a rehabilitative facility dog.



After six years of being one of the most beloved employees at St. Vincent's Villa and Villa Maria School, Carmen will retire in 2025.

Carmen was the first rehabilitative facility dog at the Catholic Charities programs, which provide comprehensive residential treatment and special education services for children whose behavioral and emotional needs haven't responded to

community-based interventions. She is the first face children see when they arrive at St. Vincent's Villa — and often the one they seek out when going through rough moments.

"It has given me a front-row seat to pain and strength and resilience — not only of the children and their families, but also of the staff," said Ezra Buchdahl, administrator of St. Vincent's Villa and Villa Maria School and Carmen's primary handler. "I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity just to be a part of it and to see the healing power of dogs. It's at a level that you really can't put into words."

TRAINED FOR THIS

Carmen and Ezra both went through extensive training with Paws4People, at their North Carolina headquarters and onsite at St. Vincent's Villa and Villa Maria School, to be ready for their work.

Since her arrival in Maryland, she has lived with Ezra's family and come to work with him, often arriving at 6 a.m. With a wagging tail, she welcomes new children on the day they arrive, transforming what can be an overwhelming moment. She offers kisses to children in crisis, de-escalating situations and helping staff avoid having to use restraints or emergency medication. And she sits in on therapy sessions and bonds with children who have

been traumatized, showing them new ways to love, trust and care for others.

"She's the most popular staff member, but I think she's got the hardest job too, because she's with kids at their most painful times," Ezra said. "She takes in all that emotion, which is why when she gets home from work, she's spent. It's another reason why she's ready for retirement."



As Ezra plans for Carmen's retirement: "Lots of play time, being a dog and not having to worry about working." He's also planning for the next rehabilitative facility dog, a process that can require months of applications and training. His goal is for Carmen to continue working until then so she can show the newcomer the ropes.

"We Never Turn A Person Away": Our Daily Bread Continued from Page 1

Standards are high for every meal. Volunteers from across Greater Baltimore prepare and donate carloads of casseroles to meet the constant need, and Coles ensures each one is perfect. She might add a little extra basil or another helping of sauce, pull vegetables from the freezer to supplement the menu or assemble a fresh banana pudding or strawberry shortcake — whatever it takes to deliver a "five-star meal," she explains.

These standards carry over to the daily meals the kitchen prepares for the clients of Christopher Place and the Weinberg Housing and Resource Center, the emergency shelter that Catholic Charities operates across the street from Our Daily Bread.

Jones emphasizes that a delicious meal is really just an entry point to the building, which provides a wide range of services, including health care, employment support, case management and more.

"People think we are just serving food. But if you come in for a meal, you might leave with an interview," Jones said. "For everybody, it starts with a meal. If you try to do these other things on an empty stomach, how successful can you be?"

**Thanks to you, we are able
to continue our work
in the community.**

Use your phone's
camera to scan
the QR code to
donate today!



CATHOLIC
CHARITIES

CHERISHING THE DIVINE WITHIN ALL

Catholic Charities is Maryland's largest and most effective provider of human services. Serving all, we provide innovative programming to accompany people on life's journey including assistance to those living in poverty, individuals with developmental disabilities, immigrants, older adults, families and children in crisis.

Catholic Charities Communications Department
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Love Your Neighbor

Across 80+ programs in 200 locations, we see that hunger and need don't discriminate. For more than a century, Catholic Charities has served Marylanders of all faiths, ages and backgrounds. Our work spans the Baltimore area... to Anne Arundel County... to Allegany and Garrett counties in western Maryland. There is no stage of life we don't impact — from infancy to the senior years.

\$15

feeds 5 people

\$25

*buys crafts with
therapeutic value
for children healing
from trauma*

\$100

*provides 3 hours
of job training*

\$200

*provides one week
of shelter*

\$300

*buys eyeglasses
for a child*

\$600

*funds field trips
for children at
St. Vincent's Villa
—Maryland's only
home for children
unable to live safely
in a family setting*

\$1,000

*prevents a family
from losing their
home*

\$2,500

*provides senior
residents with shuttle
service to local
grocery and shopping
once a month for an
entire year*

\$4,000

*installs a ramp in
front of a person's
home who has special
needs so they can age
in place*

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