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In Dorchester, hundreds stand in line for Thanksgiving baskets

By Jennifer Smith Globe Correspondent, November 23, 2021, 1:00 a.m. 16

Residents stood in line to receive a Thanksgiving meal basket for families in need. KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/GLOBE FREELANCE

Hundreds stood patiently in line this morning outside Catholic Charities Yawkey Center in Dorchester, waiting to receive the makings of a Thanksgiving feast for their families.

The United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley had ready almost 2,000 bags holding turkeys, stuffing, cranberry sauce mix, and vegetables from the Dorchester location as part of its annual Thanksgiving Project, said Lanita Tolentino with United Way.

"I think all of us want to enjoy a healthy and food-filled Thanksgiving with our families," said Debbie Rambo, president of Catholic Charities, which partners with United Way for the annual distribution.

Volunteers prepared to give out more than 100,000 pounds of food to 13 Massachusetts communities. Additional distributions will be held this week, including Monday in Lowell and Tuesday in Brockton, Rambo said.

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The Dorchester center was the launching point for the Thanksgiving distribution, and it is the largest of the state's distribution centers. About 1,500 people received their Thanksgiving baskets this morning, and the remaining food was being held for those who had registered but were not able to pick it up today. The event wrapped up just after noon, organizers said.

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Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley arrived about an hour into the distribution, greeting those handing out food and settling in along side them to pass out bags.

"People separated from family and in need are having a very difficult time right now," O'Malley said.

Those standing in line clutched pink pieces of paper — proof that they had registered beforehand. Some brought friends and family to help them wait it out and haul the food home. A line of cars stretched around the block, sluggishly moving through a makeshift drive-through lane next to the volunteer distributors.

Amy Cohen, 46, arrived about 8:30 a.m. with Sheron Dixon, 29. They had decided not to drive, figuring it would be faster standing in line. The pair was making steady progress toward the head of the line an hour later.

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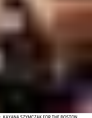

Photos: Thanksgiving baskets in Dorchester

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Dixon's 7-year-old daughter, Zaniya, bundled from head to toe with a heart-patterned scarf across her face, bounced in the cold and dashed up onto a ledge overlooking the line, waving on those waiting.

Dixon said she looked forward to getting the food and needed Zaniya's help to carry it.

"They give you a pan, too," Dixon said. "They are so sweet!"

Cohen, who works at the Neighborhood Network Center on Blue Hill Avenue, said about 50 families with the center were registered to receive meals that day.

Nicole Shand received a turkey from Cardinal Sean O'Malley. KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/GLOBE FREELANCE

"It means a lot," she said. "You get the family together, and who wouldn't want to have a free Thanksgiving meal?"

A number of returning volunteers brought their families along. Todd MacLean, 41, who had come in from Newton with his family said they had gotten another family with children to join them. It was the MacLean family's second year.

MacLean stood with other men by a large white truck, passing out whole turkeys. His wife and two young children worked at the long table, handing out the bags of food and tinfoil baking pans.

"You feel tired when you're done, but you feel great," he said.

Michael Durkin, president of United Way, who joins the volunteers each year, said many continue to suffer from the economic downturn.

The recession hit people hard, and there are "a lot of folks still having trouble putting it together," he said. Many families will try to make the Thanksgiving food last through as much of the week as possible, he said.

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As the food distribution grows each year, from 1,000 to more than 5,000 meals, it's encouraging that they have the partnerships and resources to provide for those in need, organizers said.

"You want to make sure that the line grows shorter every year," Durkin said.

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