

Turkey Week Is Here At Last

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Turkey Week was here at last. At 9 am on Monday, Nov. 18 when the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) food distribution center opened, the line of clients with shopping bags, rolling carts and extra hands was already down the block. Jolie Smith, AFAC chief development officer said, "Normally there is a line down the block but when it's Turkey Week, it doesn't stop."

The needy families who come to AFAC for supplemental groceries receive a protein selection, eggs, milk, fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, beans or pasta and a choice of canned staples. But during Turkey Week, they also receive a turkey or a chicken.

Charlie Meng, CEO of AFAC, says the number of families served by AFAC has soared to 4,000 weekly, the highest ever, and AFAC ordered 3,900 turkeys and 500 chickens this year. He explained that many older people prefer chickens because they are easier to handle. And the good news is that Turkey Week is actually giving out turkeys again this year since last year due to financial constraints everyone received a chicken instead. But Meng explains that turkeys are \$1.01 cent a pound cheaper this year than last.

Due to the pressures of the economy and increasing number of families served, AFAC has been overspending its budget in the last couple of years. Meng says that he wrote to the County Board in early October 2024 with an update out-

SEE TURKEY WEEK, PAGE 9



Charlie Meng, CEO of AFAC, lays out the need for additional assistance to support the unprecedented number of families served. Jasper, Assistant to the Director for Staff Morale, was at home the day of the interview and unable to appear in the picture with his favorite fetch toy.



The last person in line at Thursday's Turkey Week gathers up her bag of supplemental groceries and her heavy Thanksgiving turkey.

PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY RUHE/THE CONNECTION



Jolie Smith, chief development officer, and Alana Rafiee, marketing and communications director, gather a box of bananas, heavier than it looks.



Every family gets a bag with milk, eggs, bread, choice of protein, beans or pasta, and fresh produce on a weekly basis.

Meng Honored as Community Leader of the Year

Charles Meng, CEO of Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC), was presented the Community Leader of the Year Award by the Inter-Service Club Council at the Washington Golf and Country Club on Wednesday, Nov. 20.

Jeff Englander, head of the Arlington Optimist Club, presented the award to Meng for Meng's 17 years of service and his efforts in the community to spotlight the needs of those in financial distress. Englander pointed out that AFAC had served 600 families a week when it started and now it has expanded to a full

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blown logistical operation serving 4,000 a week.

Meng received a standing ovation from the packed crowd of community supporters and businesses and said afterwards, "It made me realize how much AFAC means to the community."

Matt de Ferranti was present representing the Arlington County Board. He explained later, "I am honored and grateful to work with him. Charlie is a great leader. He is

Charles Meng, CEO of Arlington Food Assistance Center receives Community Leader of the Year Award.

inclusive and fully committed to serving those in need." De Ferranti adds, "His good data and detailed approach allowed us to give AFAC additional close out money from our 2024 County funds which is not typical for the Board."

The Inter-Service Club Council of Arlington was founded in 1940 as a clearinghouse for service organizations. From its founding until 2022 it awarded an annual Man of the Year and a Woman of the Year Award. In 2023 they established the single Community Leader Award.

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FROM PAGE 3

lining the highest number of families ever served—183,558. This is a 30.5 percent increase over 2023, which had seen a 29.4 percent increase over 2022. In FY 2023 AFAC overspent its purchased food budget by \$664,929 and last year overspent the purchased food budget by another \$1 million. In September, AFAC served 5,444 unique families made up of 13,784 individuals, of whom 3,173 were children.

On the second day of Turkey Week, Meng received word that the County had allocated AFAC \$750,000 of the County's 2024 close out funds. "This will go a long way to solve the problem," Meng says last year AFAC got several unexpected estate gifts allowing them to balance the budget. "People in this community are exceedingly supportive." But he explains, "Someone saved us last year, and the County saved us this year but this just shifts the worry to next year."

AFAC donation boxes are everywhere you look around Arlington for collection of non-perishable food. AFAC has a list on their website of most requested items including canned tuna, tomatoes, beans, soups, peanut butter and cereal. "We offer different kinds of dried beans since varying cultures have their preferences." Meng says AFAC likes to get monetary donations since they need specific foods to offer and are able to buy food in quantities less expensively. But some things are too expensive to buy like peanut butter and cereal. "There are a lot of kids, and cereal flies off the shelves."

Smith says, "We keep overspending but we won't turn anyone away. So far, we've made it, knock on wood." She explains that



PHOTO BY SHIRLEY RUHE/THE CONNECTION

Warehouse workers take a break from loading, sorting and unpacking produce for distribution to low-income families.

we have a solid base of people giving money, and they are giving more. "We are lucky. I think people understand food. They go to the grocery store and they see the grocery prices. People give more when they hurt themselves."

Two more days of Turkey Week but the need will continue. Meng predicts the number of families served may reach 4,400 during the holiday season. To contribute, afac.org.

BULLETIN BOARD

Submit civic/community announcements at ConnectionNewspapers.com/Calendar. Photos and artwork welcome. Deadline is Thursday at noon, at least two weeks before the event.

2024 ARLINGTON TURKEY TROT 19TH ANNUAL FUN RUN

The Arlington Turkey Trot 19th Annual Fun Run will take place on Thursday, November 28, 2024. The Arlington County Police Department will conduct the following road closures from approximately 7:30 a.m. until 11:00 a.m. to accommodate the race:

- N. Pershing Drive from N. Edgewood Street to N. Piedmont Street
- N. Oxford Street from N. Pershing Drive to 4th Street N.
- N. Oakland Street from N. Pershing Drive to Columbia Gardens Cemetery Side Entrance
- 4th Street N. from N. Oxford Street to N. Nelson Street
- N. Irving Street from 9th Street N. to 2nd Road N.
- 2nd Road N. from N. Irving Street to Columbia Gardens Cemetery Side Entrance
- 9th Street N. from N. Irving Street to N. Highland Street
- N. Highland Street from 9th Street N. to 1st

- Street N.
- 1st Street N. from N. Highland Street to N. Fillmore Street
- N. Fillmore Street from 1st Street N. to N. Pershing Drive

DONATIONS NEEDED

Pet Food Bank. AWLA has established a Pet Food Bank to serve qualifying residents of Arlington County and the City of Falls Church. In consideration of the effect financial obstacles have on a pet owner's ability to afford pet care, the AWLA Pet Food Bank program's goal is to keep family pets out of shelters. If you are an Arlington County or City of Falls Church resident and are in need of assistance in feeding your pet, follow this link and fill out a pre-registration form. Visit goo.gl/forms/s2FuFdaYWdZm4tPw2.

Donations Needed. Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church, 2700 South 19th St., is seeking to replenish its food pantry. Particularly needed are rice (large bags appreciated, the pantry will rebag), dry beans, canned vegetables, soup, small jars of peanut butter, small jars of jelly, pasta and pasta sauce. Donations are collected during Mass each Sunday. Visit www.ourladyqueenofpeace.org for more.

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