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Many ways to help the homeless

Besides accepting money, many organizations welcome donations of new or gently used clothing and blankets, as well as toiletries and food. And volunteers are needed year-round.

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Until a week ago, Veronica Long was wondering how she was going to explain to her four children that Santa might not make it this year.

Her husband, Jonathan, used to make a good living as a music engineer and producer. But when the economy tanked two years ago, work dried up and he was forced to pawn his equipment.

For a while, the family rented a room from a friend in Corona. But when the friend was evicted earlier this year, they suddenly were homeless.

They are now staying in a room at the Union Rescue Mission on downtown Los Angeles' skid row. Last week, the shelter converted its chapel into a Christmas store where parents could pick out free toys and books for their kids.

When the Longs' children — Kayloni, 8; Nathan, 6; James, 3; and 2-year-old Aidan — wake up this morning, a pile of presents will be waiting for them under a little plastic tree festooned with lights and baubles.

"This place is a blessing," their mother said.

On any given day in Los Angeles County, more than 48,000 people are homeless. Hundreds of them are members of families like the Longs who are experiencing homelessness for the first time. The Union Rescue Mission alone has assisted more than 900 families — including some 1,900 children — since October 2008.

"How do you weather a storm that lasts this long?" asked the Rev. Andy Bales, who heads the mission.

Although a lot of people are feeling stretched for cash this season, advocates for the homeless say there are other ways to help. Many organizations welcome donations of new or gently used clothing and blankets, as well as toiletries and food. And while volunteers come out in numbers during the holiday season, homeless service organizations need help throughout the year.

"What people really need in these hard times is a human touch, a kind word," Bales said. "Even just ... serving some coffee, hearing a person's story and sharing some love."

Here are a few of the many organizations to which you can contribute:

Fred Jordan Missions serves about 600,000 meals a year to homeless people living on skid row and in nearby communities. The agency needs warm clothing, meat and nonperishable food items and financial contributions. Box 12345, Covina, CA 91722. (800) 964-3663. <http://www.fjm.org>

Lamp Community assists about 1,800 chronically homeless men and women each year who are living with severe mental illness. The group needs travel-sized bottles of shampoo, soap and towels and financial contributions. 526 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, CA 90013. (213) 488-9559, Ext. 110. <http://www.lampcommunity.org>

Los Angeles Mission serves about 1,800 meals and shelters about 480 people a day. The mission needs soap and razors, large-sized clothing, meat products and financial contributions. Volunteers are also needed to serve meals, provide legal assistance, mentor students and teach life skills. 303 E. 5th St., Los Angeles, CA 90013. (213) 629-1227. <http://www.losangelesmission.org>

Long Beach Rescue Mission serves over 200,000 meals a year and provides 180 beds to homeless men, women and children. The mission needs canned fruit and vegetables, fresh produce, thrift store donations and vehicles. Volunteers are also needed to prepare and serve meals, sort donations, help with building improvements and counsel clients. Box 1969, Long Beach, CA 90801. (562) 591-1292. <http://www.lbrm.org>

Midnight Mission provides meals, showers, shelter and rehabilitative services to more than 100,000 homeless people every year. The group needs towels, socks, underwear, meat items, cooking oil, toiletries, cleaning supplies and trash bags. Volunteers also are needed to serve breakfast, lunch or dinner. 601 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, CA 90014. (213) 624-9258. <http://www.midnightmission.org>

My Friend's Place is a Hollywood drop-in center that provides food, clothing, healthcare, educational and therapeutic services to over 1,800 homeless youth and their children annually. The center needs rain ponchos, umbrellas, men's clothing, grocery store gift cards and financial contributions. Volunteers are also needed to serve meals, play games, teach classes, accompany field trips and do office work. Box 3867, Hollywood, CA 90078. (323) 908-0011, Ext. 110. <http://myfriendsplace.org>

Ocean Park Community Center provides housing and other services to low-income and homeless people, including battered women and their children, at-risk youth and young people living with mental illness. The center needs clothing, toiletries, prepaid phone cards, store gift cards, art supplies and financial contributions. Volunteers are also needed to serve meals, distribute clothing, teach life skills and lead recreational activities. 1453 16th St., Santa Monica, CA 90404. (310) 264-6646. <http://www.opcc.org>

People Assisting the Homeless helps more than 1,800 homeless people a month find work, save money and secure housing. The group needs blankets, books, clothing appropriate for interviews, toiletries, kitchen supplies and financial contributions. Volunteers are also needed to prepare and serve meals, assemble hygiene kits, provide job search help, teach life skills and tutor homeless children. 340 N. Madison Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90004. (323) 644-2209. <http://www.eopath.org>

The Salvation Army Southern California Division provides emergency shelter and transitional housing, counseling, treatment, education and training to tens of thousands of homeless individuals and families annually. The group needs new mattresses, clothing, food items and financial contributions. 180 E. Ocean Blvd., Suite 500, Long Beach, CA 90802. (800) 725-2769. <http://www.salvationarmysocal.org>

Step up on Second serves 44,000 meals and provides permanent housing and support services to about 1,800 people affected by mental illness every year. The group needs new socks and underwear for adults, volunteers to serve meals and financial contributions. 1328 2nd St., Santa Monica, CA 90401. (310) 394-6889. <http://www.stepuponsecond.org>.

St. Joseph Center provides emergency and long-term services to about 2,500 homeless men, women and children annually. The center needs financial contributions, new housewares and volunteers qualified to provide mental health counseling. 204 Hampton Drive, Venice, CA 90291. (301) 396-6468, Ext. 335. <http://www.stjosephctr.org>

Union Rescue Mission houses about 1,000 people and serves about 3,500 meals a day. The group needs nonperishable food items, volunteers to serve meals and financial contributions. 545 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, CA 90013. (213) 347-6300. <http://www.urm.org>

Weingart Center provides counseling, treatment, education and training to about 15,000 people and transitional housing to about 3,000 people a year. The center needs bulk food donations, toiletries, cleaning products, new socks and underwear in large sizes, and items for silent auctions. Volunteers also are needed for special events. To donate \$10, text "Homeless" to 50555. 566 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, CA 90013. (213) 627-5302. <http://www.weingart.org>

To find homeless service organizations near you go to <http://www.healthycity.org/c/service> or call 211.

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