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SECTIONS

Helping the poor a year-round task

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Suzan Neiger Gould, executive director of Manna on Main Street, in the Lansdale charity's food pantry.

Serving daily meals through a late-autumn blast of ice and snow. Managing storerooms and shelves overflowing with donated food. Ensuring Christmas cheer for hundreds of needy kids through an Adopt-a-Child Gift Program.

December is always busy at Manna on Main Street, a Lansdale soup kitchen, food pantry, and emergency-aid organization that serves a slice of the Philadelphia suburbs' "hidden poor." But executive director Suzan Neiger Gould has a pointed message she likes to offer around this time of year, when seasonal spirits and tax deadlines combine to spur extra generosity.

"Hunger does not just occur during the holidays," Gould says. "Hunger doesn't take a vacation. If you're facing hunger, it's year-round, and Manna needs your support year-round."

Gould's interest in Manna is echoed by Stanley P. Jaskiewicz, a lawyer who serves as its board secretary and who lives in nearby Towamencin Township. After I wrote recently about rating groups that can help donors find charities worthy of their largess, Jaskiewicz replied with a message of his own.

Manna on Main Street, he suggested, was too small and local to draw the attention of groups such as CharityWatch, Charity Navigator, or GiveWell, which tend to focus on national and international charities. But that doesn't make it any less worthy of donors' money or time, "if the organization's mission matches the donor's goals," he said.

How can you decide whether that's true? One way is to explore what a group puts forward. Manna on Main Street, like many charities, posts its IRS Form 990 and its annual reports and audits on its website.

Another way is to ask - particularly if you can't easily find that standard IRS form, which provides financial information that helps identify nonprofits that spend more on executives, consultants, or fund-raising than on programs.

"If they say, 'What's that?' or if they say, 'I can't get it to you,' then that would be a giant red flag," Gould says.

But there's yet another way, which may be most important for organizations as tied into their communities as Manna on Main Street is to Lansdale and the larger North Penn area. That's to visit for yourself - as I did Friday at Manna, at Gould's invitation.

It was easy to see why Manna on Main Street - not to be confused with Philadelphia's Manna, or other worthy groups with similar names - counts more than 2,000 volunteers who supplement a small staff.

Manna was founded more than 30 years ago in the basement of St. John's United Church of Christ. After years next to the church, it moved last year to a storefront on West Main Street - extra space that has allowed it to add job-skills training and, so far, to help eight people find work.

But feeding the hungry is its core. Its soup kitchen serves about 100 meals a day, seven days a week. In the last year, its pantry provided 172 tons of food to nearly 1,000 families.

Some supplies are donated locally - North Penn Mazda recently kicked in \$1,000 worth of diapers. Others come from Philabundance, the regional food bank that counts Manna as a "flag agency" for meeting a set of best-practice guidelines.

Gould says Manna raised its food allotments over the summer as Congress cut back SNAP benefits, and was poised to cope if lawmakers, as seems likely, let extended-unemployment benefits expire three days after Christmas.

Does it suffer from politicians' misguided choices? Gould won't go there. "We really rise above that here," she says. "We are here to feed those who are hungry, and to lift people up, whoever they are."



Need food aid? Call Philabundance at 800-319-3663. Looking for similar groups nearby? Philabundance offered these as a sample - the first three are also flag agencies:

Cheltenham's Berachah Church Food Pantry (215-379-8700); Chester's City Team Ministries (610-872-6865), a soup kitchen, food pantry, and shelter; and Perkasio's Pennridge FISH Organization (215-257-7616), a food pantry. Also consider Cherry Hill Food & Outreach Council (856-482-0678) and Westmont's Grace Baptist Church (856-854-5573); both operate food pantries. In Philadelphia, Turning Points for Children (267-236-1541) runs a food pantry and other programs for families.

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