



## How to give back this Thanksgiving

**Between turkey, football and Black Friday planning, take a moment and help someone who needs it**

By Peter Finocchiaro  
Thursday, Nov 24, 2011



A 3-year old girl holds her mother's hand as they carry bags with food from the North Fulton Community Charities food bank in Alpharetta, Ga., in this picture taken June 4, 2008. (Credit: Reuters/Tami Chappell)

The annual celebration of Thanksgiving — looking beyond its function as a filler of stomachs and provider of marquee football matchups — is perhaps America's clearest exercise in mixed signals.

On one hand, the act of gathering around a dinner table with loved ones, taking stock of our lives and giving thanks, isn't just one of our nation's most staid traditions; it's also a fundamentally humble act that harks back to the collectivist underpinnings of America's founding myth. Consistent with that ethos, giving has become the order of the day; and each November, millions of Americans do.

It's no small irony, then, that this modest yearly ritual is followed by Black Friday — the high holiday of conspicuous consumption.

Economists may quibble over whether we're still in an official recession, but for millions of jobless Americans the answer is clear. Occupy Wall Street has drawn much-needed attention to the specter of income inequality and helped to reinvigorate the national dialogue about social safety nets. But whatever future improvements the movement might yield, there remain many, many people across the country who need help now. [Forty-six million Americans](#) currently live below the poverty line, the largest number in a half-century.

Yes, the annual mass pilgrimage to big-box stores and shopping malls is upon us. But that doesn't mean we can't still honor the spirit of the season and give back, even if we can't afford to give much. A donation of just \$10 can make an enormous difference to those hit hardest by the recession.

Below we've compiled a list of worthy charities that address four basic but vital categories of expenses: food, housing, utilities and healthcare. We've also included information on how you can give back to men and women who've served in the military. Charity Navigator, an independent website that rates a variety of nonprofits across the U.S., has awarded each of these nonprofits a four-out-of-four star rating. (All figures from CN represent the fiscal year ending December 2009.)

## Food

### [Gleaners Community Food Bank](#) (Detroit)

In recent years, Detroit has become something of a standard-bearer for recessionary America. Already struggling under the weight of a weakening automotive industry when the financial crisis hit, the city has suffered one of the highest unemployment rates in the country for years ([11.7 percent](#) as of September). Thirty-three percent of all Detroit residents [fell below the poverty line](#) at some point between 2005 and 2009, more than double the statewide average. And, as winter approaches and expenses creep up, the onus of feeding a family will become even harder to bear.

That's where Gleaners Community Food Bank comes in. Each dollar donated to the organization produces three additional meals for those in need; the bank distributes 65,000 meals each day.

"Particularly in southeast Michigan, the economy is still struggling," said Anne Schenk, senior director of development at Gleaners. "We have an enormous population of under- or unemployed folks in the region, and we're seeing the need for emergency food continue to rise."

"The holidays are a huge drain on families: Kids are out of school, so they aren't getting those subsidized meals, and parents have to provide them," she said. "Oftentimes daycare becomes an added expense. And, in southeast Michigan, it's getting cold. Heating bills go up.

"It's a really tough time for families, and there's a huge demand for emergency aid."

### [DONATE HERE](#)

*Other four-star options:*

- [Capital Area Food Bank](#) (Washington) – Donate [HERE](#)
- [Northwest Harvest](#) (Seattle) – Donate [HERE](#)

## Housing/Shelter

### [Habitat for Humanity Las Vegas](#) (Las Vegas)

Nevada, and Las Vegas in particular, has been hit especially hard by the housing market collapse, consistently suffering some of the nation's highest rates of foreclosure. (Statewide, one in every 180 households was foreclosed on in October, according to [RealtyTrac](#).) Habitat for Humanity Las Vegas provides homes — sold under market value, through a zero-interest mortgage — for families that earn less than 80 percent of their area's median income.

Habitat Las Vegas estimates that every \$10 donated pays for a box of nails, while \$75 covers the cost of a window, and a gift of \$150 buys a front door.

"Habitat for Humanity Las Vegas isn't a handout," said Meg Delor, the organization's executive director. "We work to provide decent, affordable housing to working-class families in Clark County, Nevada. The program helps to create community stability, and it really helps to solidify neighborhoods and offer better opportunities for the people who receive it."

### [DONATE HERE](#)

*Other four-star options:*

- [Homeless Emergency Project](#) (Clearwater, Fla.) – Donate [HERE](#)
- [Cleveland Housing Network](#) (Cleveland) – Donate [HERE](#)

## Utilities

### [Dollar Energy Fund](#) (Pittsburgh)

As the winter approaches, the cost of heating becomes yet another financial hardship for struggling families. The problem is particularly acute in places like Pittsburgh, whose harsh winters pose a significant challenge to those living below the poverty line ([22 percent](#) of residents between 2005 and 2009). The Dollar Energy Fund provides support for families by helping them pay their mounting utilities bills through the winter months. The organization is the largest hardship fund in Pennsylvania, and among the largest nationwide. Ninety-five percent of every dollar donated goes directly to program expenses.

### [DONATE HERE](#)

*Other four-star options:*

- [Energy Outreach Colorado](#) (Denver) – Donate [HERE](#)
- [Operation Fuel](#) (Bloomfield, Conn.) – Donate [HERE](#)

## Healthcare

### [Children's Health Fund](#) (National)

Nearly 16 million children in the U.S. live in poverty according to a [2010 survey](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau — and 1.1 million of them were added to the list between 2009 and 2010, as the country struggled through the recession. The Children's Health Fund boasts a national network of 22 pediatric programs (and two affiliates) that provide healthcare to children who might otherwise go without. The group also pays special attention to treating childhood asthma and obesity, and providing medical transportation in areas where it can be difficult for children to access immunizations and routine checkups.

A representative with the nonprofit provided some additional context: A charitable contribution of \$25 is enough to provide a pair of glasses for a child with vision loss. A \$50 gift corresponds to an appointment with a nutritionist. And a \$100 donation covers the cost of an hourlong visit with a pediatrician.

### [DONATE HERE](#)

*Other four-star options:*

- [The Saban Free Clinic](#) (Los Angeles) – Donate [HERE](#)
- [The Good Samaritan Health Center](#) (Atlanta) – Donate [HERE](#)

## Veterans

### [Hope for the Warriors](#) (National)

As of this year, [more than 40,000 service members](#) have been wounded while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Coping with the often-devastating periods of convalescence and reacclimation is a burden that many suffer silently. Hope for the Warriors provides a number of services for wounded service members and their families, including immediate financial assistance, career training and emotional support. It's also among the highest-rated nonprofits on Charity Navigator.

"Our military families incur many expenses while they stay at or near military medical centers, never leaving their wounded service member's side," said Anne Woods, the public relations director at Hope for

the Warriors. “Many of these expenses are low in dollar amount but add up very quickly as the days extend to weeks. At the same time, parents and spouses have left their jobs to become full-time caregivers.

“A \$10 donation would pay for a meal from the hospital cafeteria, laundry service, basic necessities, toiletries and more.”

**[DONATE HERE](#)**

*Other four-star options:*

- [National Military Family Association](#) (National) – Donate [HERE](#)
- [Homes for Our Troops](#) (National) – Donate [HERE](#)