



Perris News

Contact: Joe Vargo, Perris Public Information Officer
Phone: 951-956-2120
jvargo@cityofperris.org

Early Thanksgiving Dinner Arrives at Holiday Harvest

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch and Mayor Pro-Tem Mark Yarbrough took turns ladling out an early Thanksgiving dinner to more than 330 homeless men, women, children and U.S. veterans living in shelters at the former March Air Force Base.

The recipients of the annual feast lost their jobs to economic downsizing or have been battling drug and alcohol addictions or post traumatic stress disorder, which have left them unable to cope with the rigors of landing and keeping a job. They reside in shelters while they exorcise the personal demons or learn new skills to find new jobs in a tough economy.

The guests of honor at the annual "Holiday Harvest" Sunday included people living at Path of Life Ministries, Lutheran Social Services and U.S. Vets. The programs operate on property owned by the March Joint Powers Authority. Mayor Busch and Mayor Pro-Tem serve on the authority's sister agency, the March Joint Powers Commission, which is charged with redeveloping former military property that was declared surplus years ago.

Contributions from the Riverside County Board of Supervisors and Fresh and Easy Markets paid for the feast, which included turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, dressing, sweet potatoes, vegetables and pumpkin pie. Supervisor Marion Ashley also took his turn in the serving line Sunday.

Busch said he's glad to help people who are committed to resume productive lives.

"It's very nice to be able to help people who are trying to help themselves," he said. "As we focus on our own families during the holidays, it's important to consider others who are not as fortunate."

Yarbrough said the joy in the faces of the people receiving Thanksgiving dinner cannot be measured.

"We are committed to pulling together as a community to help," he said. "This means a lot to a lot of people." Clarence Wilken, 39, said he earned \$18.60 per hour as a school bus mechanic before losing his job about 10 months ago. Without an income and no prospects, he and his wife and four children found themselves homeless. They were living in another shelter until they moved into the Path of Life dormitory.

"This program allows me to keep my family together," Clarence Wilken said.



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch and Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley ladle out the feast at the annual Holiday Harvest dinner for homeless families and veterans living in shelters on land owned by the March Joint Powers Authority.



Perris Mayor Pro-Tem Mark Yarbrough, chairman of the Joint Powers Commission, dishes up some salad.



March JPA Executive Director Lori Stone with a recipient of the Holiday Harvest meal.

Wilken said he doesn't know what the future holds. Job prospects seem dim, especially with private businesses and government entities in scale-back mode. He's grateful for the counselors that help him seek potential jobs and the counselors who encourage him.

"There is a staff here that seems to care."

With Wilken are Laura Wilken, his wife and children Julia, 11, Katie, 10, David, 6 and Merideth, 5. Laura Wilken said the couple's youngest child celebrated her birthday in the shelter.

"It's difficult, but you just have to stick it out," she said. "We're so grateful for this celebration today. This is just awesome. I really touched by it. I am so thankful for everybody."

Herinda Castillo, credited the Path of Life Ministries with stabilizing her life and enabling her to regain custody of her daughter. Castillo, 36, said she battled drug addiction for more than a decade. She said the program provided parenting and budgeting classes to help with the transition from shelter life to independent living. She now lives in an apartment.

"This is so good," Castillo said. "I am getting my life back together."

Path of Life founder Raul Diaz said the shelter holds 142 beds. There's always a waiting list of at least 15 families. At times, that list reaches 60.

"The need never goes away," he said.

Diaz said the volunteers from the March JPA and Joint Powers Commission helped give a sense of dignity to the people living in shelters.

"It makes them feel special," he said.

JPA Executive Director Lori Stone said 338 people were fed during the annual Holiday Harvest. A similar program is scheduled before Christmas, at which time children living in the shelters will receive holiday gifts.

"We wanted to give something back to the homeless at the JPA," Stone said. "Clearly, this was a success."



Path of Life Ministry founder Raul Diaz (standing) with the family of Clarence and Laura Wilken.