

Richmond Times Dispatch:

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They carved turkeys at the Greater Richmond Convention Center yesterday.

A day earlier, the volunteers cleaned, seasoned, and cooked the birds -- 300 of them -- then piled them in bins inside the convention center's big refrigerator. Even cold, the turkeys looked golden and crispy. And it smelled of Thanksgiving.

"I am getting hungry, aren't you?" said Judy Jochets as she carved a turkey. "It smells fantastic."

Jochets wanted to do something different for Thanksgiving this year. So she joined The Giving Heart, an all-volunteer nonprofit group, to help put together the third-annual Community Thanksgiving Feast.

The event will serve more than 3,000 meals tomorrow. Everyone is welcome, especially seniors, the needy and people without families and friends in the area.

The feast is a special time for fellowship, said Flip Harrison, who took the week off from work to help. "It is rewarding, and it is actually a lot of fun," he said.

The volunteers made 80 gallons of gravy from scratch and opened 250 cans of cranberry sauce. They prepared mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, green beans and stuffing. Pies, rolls and beverages await guests.

All the food was donated from the community, said Vicki L. Neilson, founder and executive director of The Giving Heart.

Last year, the group served about 2,400 meals. This year, The Giving Heart will serve more because of the tough economic times.

In all, nearly 700 volunteers will put together the feast, from the turkey cutters to dining-table decorators, silverware wrappers, gift-bag assemblers and meal servers.

In the ballroom, 112 tables are in place waiting for the guests. Each can accommodate 10 people. Volunteers today will dress the tables with tablecloths and Thanksgiving centerpieces.

Each table will have a host, responsible to greet the guests, bring them food, and sit with them to eat the meal. There will be two seatings: one at 11 a.m. and one at 1:30 p.m.

"This is a community event," Neilson said. "We want to recreate the typical family dining room."