Thousands of individuals in our community work tirelessly each year to help eliminate homelessness and hunger. Gentry's Lindsay Schauer highlights their wish lists for the winter months.

Though celebrated as a joyous season, December can be the toughest time of year for many, especially those who have lost their jobs or their homes and who have trouble providing for their families and themselves. With all these local citizens in mind, we sought this season to celebrate the work being done by several outstanding organizations and their thousands of volunteers to address the issues of hunger and homelessness in our communities.

The need for housing assistance and healthy food is particularly acute in the Bay Area, where basic living costs are some of the highest in the country. According to the Corporation for Supportive Housing, there are an estimated 2,712 homeless people in San Mateo County on an annual basis, and more than 7,000 in Santa Clara County. Many of these are families with children, for whom homelessness is a brand new reality. Others are employed and continue to work but simply cannot afford a place to live. They are women, children, fathers, teenagers, and senior citizens.

But it's not a cause without hope. In the past two years, the homeless population in San Mateo County has shrunk due to an increase in affordable housing and services such as those we celebrate here. It's living proof that what these groups do on a daily basis works. And despite hard times of their own, with need up more than 40 percent in some cases and donations at their lowest, these leading service organizations persevere.

Following, we highlight just a handful of fabulous local homeless shelters, service groups, and food providers, as well as ways you can join in their cause this season. We encourage you to show them all your thanks for providing warm meals, places to sleep, sound advice, and a hand up to the thousands who need it each year.
Samaritan House
Samaritan House has been effectively providing basic needs and services to low-income residents in San Mateo County for over 30 years. Their mission is to provide struggling families and individuals with the essentials to survive while promoting self-sufficiency through an interim “safety net.” Each year, the nonprofit agency generously provides more than 400 people with warm beds, cooks over 120,000 meals in their kitchen, arranges 9,000 visits to their two free medical clinics, and distributes 40,000 new toys into the welcoming hands of happy children. During the holidays, their Family Sharing Program allows members of the community to “adopt” specific families or seniors in need and to provide them with special hand-picked holiday gifts. In addition, volunteers can help with a variety of gift giving and training programs they have, including their Christmas Carol Night on December 22. www.samaritanhouse.com

WISH LIST:
• Gifts for children, including baby clothes and toys, children’s bicycles, and movie passes for teens
• Non-perishable food items
• Toiletries, socks, and blankets
• A washer and dryer for use by residents of their Safe Harbor shelter program
• Holiday gifts for shelter residents, including rain ponchos, backpacks, gloves, and hats

Family Service Agency of San Mateo County
Celebrating 60 years of empowering those in need, Family Service offers comprehensive programs teaching children, families, and older adults life-long skills to build a self-sufficient future, regardless of ability to pay. With 20 locations on the Peninsula, Family Service offers quality early education and care for children, supervised visitation services enabling parents and children undergoing separation to maintain healthy relationships, a subsidized auto loan program, and older adult programs that offer wellness through exercise, peer counseling, healthy meals, and self-sufficiency through door-to-door transportation and job placement services. Headquartered in downtown San Mateo, Family Service has three auxiliaries: Foot Hill, Hillsborough, and Red-Car-Bel. Participate in their Jingle and Mingle Luncheon December 1 at the Peninsula Golf and Country Club and at the Family Tree Holiday Boutique through December 18 at 1589 Laurel Street in San Carlos. www.familyserviceagency.org

WISH LIST:
• Enfamil baby formula
• Diapers in all sizes
• New children’s picture books

Shelter Network
Since 1987, Shelter Network has been assisting homeless residents of the San Francisco Peninsula by providing housing and support services to help families become self-sufficient and acquire jobs and permanent housing. They are currently one of the leading organizations fighting for this cause. All programs include shelter, food and other necessities, and various services such as one-on-one counseling, life skills workshops, health care referrals, licensed child care and children’s programs, job and housing search assistance, a mandatory savings program, and a thorough follow-up program. With over 183,000 nights of shelter provided to more than 3,200 homeless adults and children, the organization has succeeded in helping over 97 percent of the families and individuals who completed Shelter Network’s programs find permanent housing again—an astounding accomplishment. This season, participate in their Dinner Basket program and help provide a meal for a family in need. Or, “adopt” a family or individual and help answer their holiday wishes. Visit their website and click on the holiday icon to learn more. www.shelternetwork.org

WISH LIST:
• Housewares: pots, pans, silverware, dish sets, and blankets
• New or gently worn warm clothes
• Alarm clocks, watches, wallkets, planners, and 2010 calendars
• Educational toys for children
• Holiday dinner baskets with nonperishable food items

InnVision
Founded in 1973 by concerned members of nine San Jose churches, InnVision’s programs aim to break the cycle of homelessness throughout Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. As Silicon Valley’s largest nonprofit provider of homeless shelters and services, the organization’s 20 different locations offer emergency and long-term housing, warm nutritious meals, clothing, showers, health care, job training, and children’s services as they help families and individuals find “the way home.” Every year, InnVision serves over 200,000 meals and provides over 165,000 nights of housing aided by over 100 dedicated staff members and more than 2,000 volunteers. Donated goods and services from community members like you make up 23 percent of InnVision’s annual budget. This season, they continue their programs and offer additional services as the weather cools off and families seek help and hope for the holidays. www.innvision.org

WISH LIST:
• New stuffed animals, board games, puzzles, or teen gifts for their “Holiday Shoppe” Drop them off at 33 Encina Avenue, Palo Alto.
• Fresh fruit for SVdP’s Homeless Help Centers
• Compassionate volunteers to answer SVdP’s Helpline, which is always busy during the holidays
• Help delivering food to a family on a home visit
• New stuffed animals for the SVdP thrift stores
• New sleeping bags
• Comfort food is always needed

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul
As the largest homeless shelter in Northern California, The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been providing crucial help to anyone in need for over 149 years. As a leader in homeless housing and personal care in San Francisco, the organization offers crisis counseling, drop-in medical care and HIV-testing, mental health and substance abuse case management, job and housing search programs, trauma support groups, a library and computer lab, emergency clothing, shower and laundry facilities, and assistance to certain individuals with more pronounced issues that often no one else will take in. Along with Onanam Detoxification Center, St. Vincent de Paul also recently opened a new Wellness Center to encourage a daily program of meditation, exercise, spirituality, nutrition, and member support groups. This season, they will provide more than 1,800 families with food for holiday meals and distribute more than 4,000 toys to children. www.svdp-sf.org

WISH LIST:
• Fresh fruit for SVdP’s Homeless Help Centers
• Compassionate volunteers to answer SVdP’s Helpline, which is always busy during the holidays
• Help delivering food to a family on a home visit
• New stuffed animals for the SVdP thrift stores
• New sleeping bags
• Comfort food is always needed
Community Services Agency of Mountain View, Los Altos, and Los Altos Hills

Serving the area from Mountain View to Los Altos and Los Altos Hills, the Community Services Agency (CSA) provides case management and other essential services to hundreds of homeless and low-income families each year. On an annual basis, their small staff manages to supply food and other items to over 5,000 individuals, to care for the mental and medical needs of 200 seniors, and to provide school supplies and holiday donations to over 1,000 children. In 2009, they saw demand at their Food and Nutrition Center rise 20 percent, meanwhile facing a severe decrease in donations. Demand for their Alpha Omega Homeless Services increased 63 percent this year. Their programs during the holidays include a Holiday Sharing Program that allows parents to come “shop” for appropriate gifts for children in an environment that places personal dignity above all else. www.csacares.org

WISH LIST:
- New toys for children and babies
- Gift certificates for teens
- Non-perishable food, including canned and dry goods
- Pajamas for boys and girls ages 8 – 12

Home and Hope

Home and Hope (formerly the Interfaith Hospitality Network) of San Mateo County focuses on solutions that provide more effective and lasting results for homeless families by providing emergency shelter and three meals every day. As more families are displaced into homelessness and shelters are forced to close their doors, Home and Hope has united with 29 interfaith host congregations to provide more space for urgent care. Guests receive home-cooked, sit-down, family-style dinners, private sleeping arrangements, breakfast, and bag lunches. Games, crafts, and homework assistance are available for the children and adults, as well as separate quiet areas for movies or book-reading. Their Day Center in Burlingame provides guests with showers, laundry facilities, and resources to help in job search, training, and resume writing, as well as housing assistance. This holiday, they will be wrapping gifts beside Santa at the Stanford Shopping Center. www.homeandhope.net

WISH LIST:
- Donate to help fund their programs, or sponsor director Raj Rambob’s upcoming marathon where funds raised will benefit their programming. www.firstgiving.org/smcihn09
- Home and Hope is always looking for congregations, service clubs, or groups to become engaged volunteers to support the sheltering program.

Project WeHOPE

Started in 1999 with a mission to provide resources and programs that address youth education and literacy, leadership and responsibility in the community, and homelessness, Project WeHOPE remains a leader in their East Palo Alto community. Their sheltering program is the only one within East Palo Alto and provides a safe place for homeless individuals to sleep during inclement weather. This burgeoning program, and their support and partnership with surrounding organizations, is helping them grow into a leading service provider for their community. As they say, “Project WeHOPE can do more, be more, and reach more with your help.” www.projectwehope.org

WISH LIST:
- Funds to build shower facilities at their East Palo Alto shelter
- Blankets, pillows, and bedding
- A large refrigerator and 60-cup coffee machine
- Heating or air conditioning for their space
- Website design services

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties

Second Harvest, the largest nonprofit provider of food in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, has provided food for hundreds of organizations since 1974. “Our goal is to close the hunger gap,” says Lynn Crocker, director of marketing and communications. “We want to feed as many people as possible and ensure that everyone who needs food has access to it.” Their food drives provide items to dozens of other groups in the area as well. Second Harvest’s Holiday Food and Fund Drive has already kicked off, and they say this holiday season is more critical than ever. As they strive to feed more and more people in need in our community, they are asking everyone to do what they can and give a gift that truly matters to every family—food. www.shfb.org

WISH LIST:
- Holiday meal essentials such as canned food, turkeys, and ham
- Nutritious snacks for children
- Donations to provide groceries for senior citizens
- Donations to buy a new forklift for their food distribution

Bread of Life EPA

As a food provider in East Palo Alto, Bread of Life EPA serves warm meals to homeless individuals, families with young children, the elderly, chronically ill patients, and recovering addicts in the East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park communities, where need remains great and services scarce. Five days a week, guests receive hot, nutritious, delicious meals prepared by volunteers who also provide donated clothing and other necessities. Bread of Life EPA prides itself on having “a non-judgmental atmosphere of love, respect, and expectation that those suffering in poverty will partner with Bread of Life EPA and other local nonprofit groups to work toward wholeness and healthy productivity in our society,” as stated in their mission. They also provide resources for education and health, as well as care and spiritual guidance to those who come through their doors. www.breadoffifeepa.org

WISH LIST:
- Volunteers to serve meals
- A volunteer driver
- Willing individuals to lead fundraising drives
- Meats and paper products for serving
- Gift cards for groceries, McDonald’s, Jack in the Box, Jamba Juice, and others