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## Obama galvanizes local effort

Valley set for day of service and more

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Valley residents will open their wallets, kitchen pantries and schedules to answer President-elect Barack Obama's call for National Day of Service Monday.

And that's only the beginning.

"Everything isn't just happening on that day of service. It's a much broader call," said Lisa Baskin, a member of Obama for America and participant in public service efforts. "This is no longer party-political. This is community. This is for all of us. He's going to be president of everybody."

Organized by the Presidential Inaugural Committee, the National Day of Service is the beginning of a larger effort that seeks to motivate Americans to serve their cities, towns and neighborhoods.

The committee spread the word last month with calls and emails to national service organizations of all sizes, ideologies and politics. While government addresses problems in the nation, the email said, Obama believes each American has a responsibility for local improvement.

People responded and congregated in thousands of house meetings coast-to-coast to discuss transitional work with the new administration and the service tasks at hand. They talked about prioritizing local, national and international issues - the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care, economy, energy and violence in the Middle East - and they identified lawmakers to call.

"This is all part of understanding that for any change to happen in the country, it's going to be the people" who make it, said Baskin, who attended local house meetings in December.

In discussions at those meetings, people discussed ways to help their communities. They encouraged others to volunteer at the food bank, hospital or in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, Baskin said.

"Money is not the only way to achieve change and to help people," Baskin said.

Belchertown response

BelchertownCAN!, which formed in response to the call for public service, has tripled in size since the organization's first meeting in December with about 25 members.

"As a selectman I recognize a lot of faces," said James Barry, a member of BelchertownCAN! who didn't recognize half of the attendees at the last meeting. "In this particular case I'm seeing a broader range of the public involved, which I think is great."

BelchertownCAN!, an acronym for Community Aid Network, will collect nonperishable food donations at Stop & Shop and Checkers Market Jan. 24 for distribution to food pantries at Dwight Chapel, St. Francis Catholic Church, United Church of Christ and the Amherst Survival Center.

"We understood groups do food drives around the holidays, but often after the holidays is when the food pantries have the biggest problem," Barry said.

McCarthy's Pub is donating bottle-redemption proceeds for the next few weeks while Crystal Car



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Care pledged 10 percent of the month's sales to the project.

"We envision this event as a display of Belchertown's sense of community, and we feel it is important for local businesses to be a part of that spirit of giving," said co-owner Shelley Seymour.

People can stay at home in their pajamas and still help the hungry.

Visit [www.foodbankwma.org](http://www.foodbankwma.org), click "how to help," and make a donation, advises The Obama Grassroots of Western Massachusetts, which organized the fund drive with Western Mass Food Bank. A \$20 donation will buy \$140 worth of food.

The \$20 figure was chosen because Obama will be inaugurated on the 20th, said Nicole Lachapelle, secretary of the Easthampton Democratic Committee.

"Our hope is 100 people will donate \$20 and that in turn will purchase \$14,000 worth of food," LaChapelle said. "It's pretty powerful."

Schools like Littleville Elementary School in Huntington are also participating in the National Day of Service. Littleville students will donate canned soup, spaghetti sauce, tuna, peanut butter and rice to the Huntington Food Drive for Food Bank of Western Massachusetts.

"Helping our community gives us a good feeling," said Joanne Blocker, principal. "The community always supports our school and Littleville students feel a sense of pride when we can help out."

Local National Day of Service event organizers say the call to service brings people of various backgrounds and interests together as they look to improve schools, survival centers, hospitals, the environment and more. They strive to identify and match opportunities with plans of action.

"This is back to the model of community organizing," Baskin said. "We're not organizing for a political campaign, we're organizing for this country to work to bring about improvements in people's lives. This is a time of hope and expectation."

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