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## About 700 enjoy 25th annual free Thanksgiving Day dinner

### Move to Hope Community may have contributed to drop in attendance

*By Amanda Nalley*  
**DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER**

As Pauline Cooper waited in line for a free glass of tea, she couldn't help but be thankful that her 13-year-old daughter, Priscilla, is still alive. This year, Priscilla not only had surgery for scoliosis but survived a bus accident that left her without a spleen.

Cooper and her daughter were two of the many who enjoyed the festivities and food at the 25th annual free community Thanksgiving dinner.

About 700 people attended the event, down from 1,200 last year.

"There have been fewer people, but we are probably targeting the population we are trying to help the most," said Vickie Goodman, business manager for event sponsor Premier Construction and Development, which donated \$10,000 for the event.

Goodman attributed the decline in numbers to the event moving from Ole Times Country Buffet on North Monroe to the Big Bend Homeless Coalition's Hope Community on West Pensacola Street. Premier accepted the coalition's offer to host the event as an improvement in logistics and economics.

"I think that we are all in tough economic times here," said Tina Reason, agency relations director for America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend food bank. "Most of us are about one paycheck away from homelessness. People fall into a depression this time of year. This really helps them feel like they are not alone."

Premier's late founder, Pepper Ghazvini, began sponsoring community Thanksgiving Day meals in 1993, and the Ghazvini family was on hand to enjoy the day.

"The pros are that there is much more space, and it is not in a parking lot," Reason said about the move. Leftovers were donated to the Big Bend Homeless Coalition.

StarMetro provided free bus service from several shelters and Lake Ella to the location.

Inside the cafeteria, volunteers scrambled to serve guests plates piled high with turkey, gravy, stuffing, green beans and more.

Outside, the music of the Charles Atkins Band filled the air as guests made free long-distance phone calls to their family and friends and picked up much-needed items such as winter coats and blankets. Pies, cakes and even sugar-free desserts covered tables.

"I enjoyed playing horseshoes," said Carton Knowles about one of the available activities. Knowles has been homeless since he was released from prison in 2002 and has attended the dinner in the past.

"To learn at a young age to give back is a wonderful life lesson," said Leon High School Principal Rocky Hanna, whose students donated both time and money to the cause, purchasing 50 turkeys and helping prepare food. "What a wonderful example of what this community can accomplish."

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