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Last Updated: February 26, 2010 1:00AM

Andiamo's helps feed homeless, working poor at Capuchin Soup Kitchen

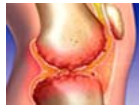
Leonard N. Fleming / The Detroit News

Detroit --With no steady work and a meager budget in a struggling economy, Barbara Shephard says a good meal is hard to find.

But on Thursday at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen on the city's east side, Shephard had a lunch plate full of homemade Italian pasta, green beans, salad, garlic bread and cookies courtesy of Andiamo Restaurant Group.

"It's a blessing to be able to have a place to go eat," said Shephard, 59, who lives in an apartment complex next door to the soup kitchen on Conner. "People don't have to help you and like I said, people are having a hard time. It fills in the gap, especially when you don't have the money to pay for those meals."

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The lunchroom was packed for lunch and dinner Thursday as top chefs and managers for Andiamo prepared and served the primarily homeless and working poor of the city.

Organizers expected at least 1,200 residents to get an Andiamo meal. Nearly 400 people came for the lunchtime service including Keith Messenger, 51, who lost his foot in a work-related accident in 1984 and has been disabled -- and sometimes homeless -- ever since.

"It was good gourmet food," Messenger said. "I've been hungry and being hungry is not a good thing."

Joseph P. Vicari, chief executive officer of Andiamo, said his restaurant group has served meals at the soup kitchen a few times before given his longtime involvement with the Capuchin organizers. Andiamo has 12 restaurants in Metro Detroit including a location along the riverfront.

Vicari said he has helped generate \$200,000 over a 15-year period through various fund-raisers for the Capuchin Soup Kitchen as part of his restaurant's effort to "give back."

"Like anything, it gives you a different perspective now that you can see what's going on and what the Capuchins (are) doing," he said. "Everybody's hurting today. But we can't give up."

Mike Breen, the manager at the soup kitchen founded in 1929 as the ministry of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order, said the effort shows that even in tough times people care.

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"It's wonderful. How often do you get somebody to come in and not only purchase and prepare food but bring in chefs and help out at the same time," Breen said. "It means a lot to them. You have a hot meal for the day, something they don't always get."

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