

Food Banks Forced to be Frugal Over Holidays

SHORTCHANGED IN A BUDGET-SLASHING MOVE BY THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD BANK DIRECTORS SAY THEY CAN'T MEET THE NEEDS OF THE HUNGRY THIS WINTER WITHOUT LOTS OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

by Joel Moreno

At the behest of the Clinton Administration, a cold blow was dealt in the autumn months to a group least able to defend themselves—America's poor and hungry.

The United States Department of Agriculture, considering the president's request to streamline federal food assistance programs, cut spending on the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) by \$55 million this fiscal year, slashing it to an annual \$25 million limit.

For approximately 26 million Americans who depend on neighborhood food pantries, many of whom are children, the reduction in TEFAP spending translates into fewer goods in pantry cupboards and little to be cheery about this holiday season, say local program advocates.

"Just here in Santa Cruz County, we're losing over 200,000 pounds of staple, non-perishable products," said Willy McCrea, the executive director of the Second Harvest Food Bank.

Federal assistance accounts for only 10 percent of Second Harvest's overall donations, but McCrea said the small percentage isn't reflective of how essential the contributions are.

"A person might look at it and go shoot, this is only 10 percent of what we get, but this is a really critical 10 percent," McCrea said.

TEFAP supplies Second Harvest with USDA commodities like peanut butter, rice, apple juice, corn meal, refried beans, butter and kidney beans. McCrea said food banks depend on the government for these basic staples because these foods aren't donated in sufficient quantity from other sources.

And, now that the government



Volunteers sort through donated food

has shirked the seasonal supplies, directors of area community organizations say they hope they can handle the new responsibility.

"With the recently announced loss of 200,000 pounds of USDA commodities, the need for total community involvement in ending hunger is greater than ever," said Tim Robertson, chair of the Holiday Food Drive in Santa Cruz County. "I hope to encourage every business and social organization to contribute in any way they can."

Local businesses and community groups have taken up the challenge with a goal of raising 100,000 pounds of food this holiday drive. They are counting on an outpouring of compassion from throughout Santa Cruz County to meet that enormous goal.

Second Harvest has been contacting every major employer in the area to see if they are interested in having holiday food drive bags for their employees. McCrea says that people are often more inclined to give at this time of the year, and having food bags available to the workers helps facilitate those actions.

"Sometimes people don't know which program or pantry to help, and by working through the community wide food drive, they're helping them all," McCrea said.

Waste Not, Want Not

Executives at Waste Management, which serves about 35,000 residents throughout the county, have plans for an innovative food collection strategy. From November 28 through December 2, Waste Management will offer curbside pick-up of food collection bags. It's the first time anything like this has been tried in the county, but Waste Management's community rela-

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tions manager Barbara Zeitman-Olson said the convenience to donors made the collection method effective in other places.

The specially marked bags are available at local newspapers, including The Mid-County Post, and the donations will be picked up along the same route drivers regularly follow.

"We're asking people to put the bags out by the recycling containers, and we will collect them on the route on the regular garbage day," Zeitman-Olson said.

She hoped the convenience of donating would encourage more people to participate this year, because even well-intended do-gooders can't always make their way down to the fire station or the local library with a bag of foodstuffs, she said.

Jazzercise classes put a twist of their own on this season's food collection drive, asking dancers in Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville to bring bagged food donations with them to class.

Local youth in the Boy Scouts and 4H Club are also trying to help Second Harvest meet its

food drive goals. Troop 633, sponsored by Trinity Presbyterian Church, Troop 614 from First Baptist Church and Live Oak 4H Club will send 110 boys and girls into the community this month to fill at least three grocery bags apiece.

Church and humanitarian organizations have offered food assistance programs for decades, some independently, and some as part of a countywide network of food pantries.

Volunteers Will Play Key Roles

Jeff Long, a layperson with the Soquel Church of Grace, said as many as 75 people seek food from the church's pantry program each week, about two-thirds of them children. The problem now, he said, was that federal cutbacks are handicapping these programs in meeting the demand for food.

The key element in all these food drives are the volunteers. McCrea said it's the volunteers who make these kinds of food drives possible.

Although not officially part of the Holiday Food Drive effort, members of the California Grey Bears have shown just how much volunteers can accomplish with their comprehensive recycling effort and ongoing "brown bag" food assistance program for persons over 55-years-old. During the slack part of the week, the facility in Live Oak might only see 30-35 volunteers, but have pushed 100 on big delivery days. All of the volunteers are seniors.

"This is a tremendous program for seniors to volunteer their time," said Ed Barrows, the director of the brown bag program. "It's one of the best things about this program because it gives a lot of seniors a very meaningful

thing to do."

The Grey Bears independently distribute as many as 3,000 food bags filled with up to 15 pounds of food each week. In the course of a single year, Barrows estimated Grey Bears volunteers distribute two million pounds of food locally.

Hunger Survey Results a Surprise

Second Harvest tried to get the word out early about federal cutbacks, and provided a scientific study on hunger in the United States analyzing a seemingly incongruous situation where millions of Americans living in the "land of plenty" go hungry.

Completed earlier this year, the national study interviewed recipients at food pantries, food kitchens, shelters and other emergency feeding programs. According to the survey, 45 percent of the people being served

food did not expect to need assistance three months prior to their first request for help.

"What we're talking about is addressing people who are going through a hard time right now, and need a little extra help until they get back on their feet," McCrea said.

Demographic information further revealed a significant percentage of those needing assistance are women and children. Women account for 61 percent, while children aged 17 and younger make up 43 percent of food network clients. Caucasians comprise the largest racial grouping, but African Americans are unproportionately represented in terms of their overall numbers included in total census counts.

While the study's results represent national trends, McCrea said they have "local validity," and felt the federal funding cuts couldn't have been made more inappropriately.

"The things that's so frustrating is that this program is the ideal partnership," McCrea said. "It's the kind of thing you want to see. You want to see volunteerism, you want to see local initiative, neighbors helping neighbors." □

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