

Food Banks Winter puts pressure on food bank

By J. ALEX TARQUINIO
STAFF WRITER

Winter is a particularly demanding time for hunger-relief workers in Watsonville. The need for their services skyrockets with annual layoffs at the end of the harvest season.

Willy Elliott-McCray, executive director of the Second Harvest Food Bank, said there's not much he can do to meet the increasing demand in winter except pray a lot.

"We're always doing what we can," he said.

And what Second Harvest can do is impressive.

'We're always doing what we can.

— Willy Elliott-McCray
Second Harvest

Second Harvest, located in a warehouse just outside of Watsonville, processes 4½ million pounds of food a year, directing it to about 100 distribution sites countywide. These include food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, seniors groups, rehab programs and child-care centers.

Both Santa Cruz County and the city of Watsonville have designated Second Harvest as the chief agent in organizing the distribution of food and basic necessities in the case of disaster. After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, 2 million pounds of relief supplies moved through the Second Harvest warehouse in the first two weeks.

And the nonprofit agency does it all with 13 employees and about 350 volunteers.

The Second Harvest network is nationwide, trading commodities between member food banks based on need and product availability. That way individual food banks can provide

their clients with a balance between grains, canned goods and produce.

Second Harvest of Santa Cruz and San Benito counties also works closely with local community leaders. Elliott-McCray said one thing he loves about his job is the diversity of people he works with.

"You have political progressives, business leaders and conservatives all sitting around the board table talking," he said. "At first this was awkward, but then we quickly recognized each other for what we are — people that get things done."

Elliott-McCray did say some progressives disapprove of his "fraternizing with food producers." But he disagrees with this opinion.

"The food industry is all about feeding people," said Elliott-McCray, who belongs to the

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. "And when you pull together and build a coalition, it's only the depth of commitment to the cause that counts."

Elliott-McCray said the problem of hunger is on the rise. "In the '70s, we had the hunger problem almost licked. Whereas 15 years ago we'd talk about the starving children in India, today we talk about the starving children in Watsonville."

The increasing demand for food bank services is not just a seasonal or a local problem, Elliott-McCray said. It is a national problem.

According to a 1993 national research study by the Second Harvest network, Second Harvest Food Banks serve about 10 percent of the U.S. population, roughly 25 million people. Many of the network's clients are recently unemployed. One in five

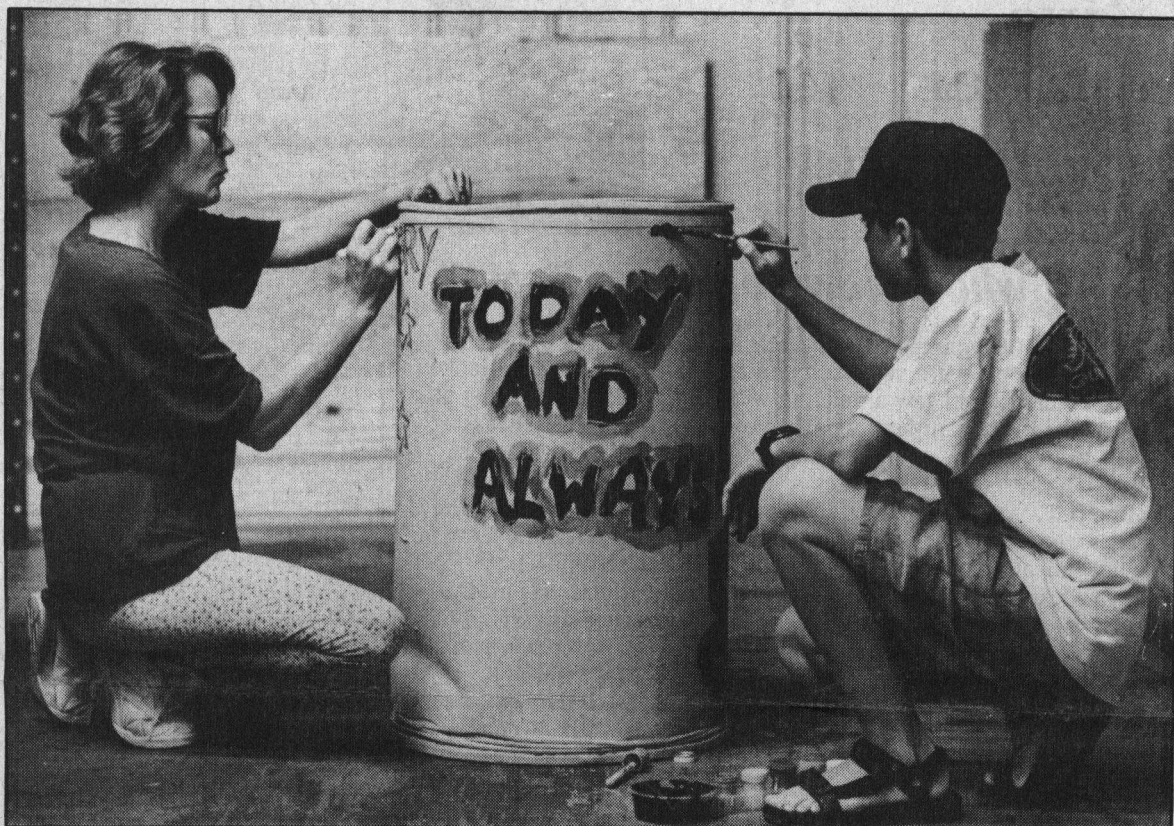
is homeless.

Nearly 43 percent of these clients are children, according to the survey. Children represent about 25 percent of the U.S. population.

Just over 50 percent of the network's clients are white; roughly 33 percent are African American; about 12 percent are Latino; just under 3 percent are Native American; and just over 1 percent are Asian.

More than 45 percent of the network's clients said they did not expect to need assistance three months before first receiving services.

For more information about Second Harvest, call 662-0487. For information on the nearest food pantry or kitchen, call Second Harvest's Community Food hot line at 662-0991 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Friday.



Kurt Ellison

Judy Dover and son Aaron paint a Care Barrel for Second Harvest Food Bank's holiday food drive at the organization's Watsonville warehouse.

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