

Pantries eye food bank with anger, hope

By GREG BEEBE

Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — People who serve on the "front lines" of the war on hunger are watching the status of the area food bank with fear, hope and disgust.

Assurances from two factions competing for food-bank control that service will not be interrupted are not quite enough for some pantry directors.

"We are the pantry managers, we are the people who are on the front line every day and we see the people who come in," said Ester Delgado, who operates the Daily Bread pantry in Santa Cruz. Daily Bread distributes as much as 8,000 pounds of food a month from Word of Life Church on Wilkes Circle.

"This (dispute) has been brewing for the last couple of years and we were not told anything about what to expect and all of a sudden — boom — it's on us."

Just who will operate the local food bank,



Delgado

suppliers of an estimated 5 million pounds of food a year to needy residents of Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties, came into doubt following a decision earlier this week by the National Second Harvest Food Bank Network in Chicago.

Second Harvest provides, by some estimates, as much as 60 percent of the food distributed to the hungry in the tri-county area. But it is ready to break its ties with non-profit Food and Nutrition Services, holder of the local food bank contract for some 20 years, because it claims FNS no longer meets all of the network's standards for food distribution to the poor.

The FNS food bank, according to Second Harvest, has two months to pull the bank out from under its \$7 million social-service umbrella or lose its contract.

Food and Nutrition Services likely will appeal the decision, said FNS executive director Bob Garcia.

A rival non-profit group of former members of the FNS food bank operating board is hoping to assume control of surplus food distribution here. That group, Food Bank Services, predicts FNS will move the food fight to the legal arena as well.

Meanwhile, human links in the charity food chain are scared, angry and feeling caught between a stale dinner roll and a hard place.

"I was very angry when I first heard about it," said Delgado. "If they could play with us, play their little political games with no thought of us ... How can I trust either side?"

"One of my fears," she said, "is that (private) donors are going to look at (the food bank dispute) and say, 'Hey, these people don't know what they want to do so we're just going to keep our money in our pockets.'"

At the People Helping People food distribution outlet in downtown Santa Cruz, where 500 people receive food bags monthly, organizer Lotus Maynor said her pantry and others "haven't at this point decided who we're throwing our support behind because we're trying to hear from both sides. ...

"We're all obviously really concerned," Maynor said. "Since we serve the people who are actually getting the food, we want some say in what goes on, in not only acquiring the food but distributing it."

In Watsonville, where Loaves and Fishes

serves 1,500 free lunches and distributes more than 10,000 pounds of food each month, pantry director Bea Caldwell said, "I just want to make sure that food is provided to the people. That's my main concern right now ...

"We don't want donations to drop because of this problem ... and I know that it could happen," said Caldwell.

Annette Marcum, whose Valley Churches United pantry in Ben Lomond provides, among other things, almost a ton of food a week to 1,700 San Lorenzo Valley residents each month, hopes cooler heads will prevail.

"What I'm hoping happens is that they really sit back and think of this as being a nice divorce instead of hashing this through the courts ... and then it would not affect us providers. ...

"Why would Food and Nutrition Services want to take the money out of food service programs to feed the hungry to pay for a lawsuit?" said Marcum.

The area food supply figures to be further strained when 2 percent cuts in state welfare benefits and an untested new food-stamp distribution plan begin in September, said pantry directors.