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### Food Bank makes use of new, larger Fairfield warehouse

By Sarah de Crescenzo  
November 17th, 2010

Daily Republic

FAIRFIELD — When an organization dedicated to feeding the hungry is forced to turn away donations because there's not enough space, it's time for a change.

To accommodate an increase in donations and volunteers in response to skyrocketing need, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano has relocated its Fairfield distribution center from the Woolner Avenue facility to a more spacious warehouse on Courage Drive.

Aside from a different pickup point, local nonprofits that pick up from the distribution center may not have noticed much of a change -- and that's how it should be, Executive Director Larry Sly said.

"Our service should be pretty seamless to them," he said. "Our hope would be that . . . it just seems like everything is better, but not in a way they're aware of."

And it has become better, as the additional storage space has allowed more donations to be accepted -- both of food and volunteers who come by to help out sorting and boxing incoming food.

"This will allow us to get donations we maybe had to say no to in the past," Sly said. "We shouldn't have to say no to anything . . . it's absolutely the wrong thing to do. We should be able to accept any donation offered to us."

The new location has made pick-ups logistically simpler for Arthur Hernandez, who loads food from the warehouse into his pickup truck each week for the food pantry at the North Texas Street church Life Changing Reality.

"Everything's outside now and there's more room," he said. "(The old warehouse) was a little smaller and people would be bumping into each other."

He and Mike Berdak, who runs the pantry with his wife Pam Berdak and a cadre of enthusiastic volunteers, make weekly visits to pick up sorted bags of assorted groceries for the 40-odd individuals that line up as early as 8 a.m. outside the pantry each Tuesday for its 11 a.m. giveaway.

Those people are part of the 132,000 people the Food Bank feeds each month, with 43,000 of those in Solano County.

Two years ago, that number ranged in the high 90,000s, Sly said.

As the need increased with the economic downturn, the larger storage space in Concord was no longer large enough.

During the 2009 holiday season, the Food Bank had to rent space next door to the Concord warehouse to store incoming donations. The opportunity to lease a large, cheap space in Fairfield pushed the decision to take action in Solano.

"We realized, especially with the real estate market right now, we could get the facility at a reduced rate," Sly said.

The new space is about 19,000 square feet.

"Because the need is increasing every month, we just needed more space," said Lisa Sherrill, community relations manager for the Food Bank. "Not only do we have more ground space . . . we (also) have racks in the new space so we'll be able to stack the pallets of food up four levels."

This has tripled the storage available for food donations, Sly said.

About 30 percent of the donations to the Food Bank come from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which are distributed from Sacramento, Sly said.

"In the past, we've had to truck it down to Concord because that's where we had to store it, but now we can leave some in Solano," Sherrill said.

The new storage capabilities allow the food needed in Solano to remain in the warehouse, while the rest is taken south for distribution in Contra Costa County.

Another factor in the need for increased space is an upswing in the amount of fresh produce donated, spurred by programs pushing healthier eating, Sly said.

The majority of the donations from the California Association of Food Banks -- which accounts for about one-third of the Contra Costa and Solano Food Bank's food donations -- are fresh fruit or vegetables, Sly said.

Produce now makes up about a third of all the food donated to the Food Bank, he said.



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Though inflation rates are generally stable, about 1 million pounds per year come in from food drives -- the holiday season brings an increased rate of giving, Sly said.

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"We're almost like the retail world during the holiday season . . . that's when people want to give, they're motivated and it's the spirit of the season," Sly said.

With the additional space, the Food Bank's ability to bring in volunteers who want to give their time to the organization has also improved.

Groups of employees from numerous local corporations regularly volunteer at the Food Bank.

In the Courage Drive warehouse, a number of groups can be accommodated, whereas previously only about 15 people could sort and box at the same time, generally ruling out more than two large volunteer groups doing so at the same time, Sherrill said.

Generous office space is also now available, including a conference room that the Food Bank is offering to other community-based organizations who schedule a time to use it.

In addition, the extra square footage gave the Food Bank the opportunity to establish a front desk area, staffed with volunteers who greet visitors and answer phone calls.

The warehouse opened in September at 2339 Courage Drive, Suite F, but is having a public ribbon-cutting ceremony from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Thursday.

For more information, call 421-9777, or visit <http://www.foodbankccs.org>.

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