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Food banks turn to Season of Sharing Fund for help

Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, December 11, 2011

One out of every 10 households in the Bay Area will turn to a food bank this holiday season for sustenance, officials say.

Not just the elderly or people too disabled to work, but residents who until a year or two ago held lucrative jobs, owned nice homes and could afford to fill their carts at the supermarket.

"Use is up 40 to 45 percent from three years ago," said Larry Sly, executive director of Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, adding that he's now serving 132,000 people a month. "It's a real tough time. Many of the people, especially in Contra Costa County, made their livings in the construction industry. And now, because of the economy, that's dead."

It's also a real tough time for food banks. With more users and less federal funding and fewer corporate sponsors, food banks are scrambling to keep up with demand.

That's why they rely on organizations such as The San Francisco Chronicle's Season of Sharing Fund, which gives 15 percent of the money it raises - the rest goes to families in need - to the Bay Area's eight food banks. In the past 25 years those food banks have received \$12 million from the program.

Last year Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, which lost \$100,000 in FEMA funds because of federal cutbacks, got \$171,000 from the campaign. The money was earmarked solely for food.

"This campaign is an incredible contribution to our work," Sly said.

For Kathy Jackson, the CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, every dollar donated buys two healthy meals. Her food bank is now serving 250,000 people a month.

"Most of these people have just hit a pothole in life - something occurred like a health problem or divorce that they hadn't planned for," she said. "We've seen a tremendous increase in first-time callers. Sometimes they don't even know what to say."

Last year Second Harvest distributed 45 million pounds of food, Jackson said. Seven million pounds of that were USDA commodities. But Jackson said she is expecting a 40 percent reduction in those commodities this year, which means she'll have to ramp up fundraising and try to get more corporate food donations.

The money Second Harvest receives from Season of Sharing is a huge help, she said. In 2010 the food bank received \$244,920 from the fund, which paid for nearly 500,000 meals.

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The advertisement is for JCPenney's jcpCASH promotion. It features a green background with the JCPenney logo at the top left. The main offer is "\$10 off any purchase totaling \$25 & up". Below this, it says "no exclusions! on all family apparel, accessories, shoes, jewelry & home". At the bottom, there are two clearance sections: "RED ZONE 80% FINAL off MARKDOWNS" and "50-70% off NEW MARKDOWNS". A small red button says "view today's ad".

David Goodman, executive director of Redwood Empire Food Bank, which serves Sonoma, Lake, Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte counties, said he lost \$80,000 in federal funding this year, while in the last two years he's started serving 8,000 new faces a month.

"But we're not a woe-is-me organization," he said, adding that spending the bulk of his energy on crying about lost money "doesn't actually feed people."

So he, his staff and volunteers are working extra hard to put food on the tables of those in need. The \$26,820 that Redwood Empire received last year from Season of Sharing will buy 12,000 meals.

"When you can't breathe, you call 911," he said. "When you need food, you call us."

It's a big hurdle for some people to make that call, he said.

"No one ever imagines being in a food line, not even people of meager means," Goodman said. "It's bewildering, it's devastating and it takes a world of courage. That's why I find it a privilege to serve these people."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/12/11/BAE01M9064.DTL>

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