

Postal workers praise donations for food drive

John King, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 10, 2009

The men and women who deliver mail added another task to their rounds on Saturday: collecting food from customers along their routes.

And while it's too early to say whether Bay Area letter carriers reached their goal of collecting 775,000 pounds of food, the early indications are that this year's donations aren't just stray boxes and jars from the kitchen.

"We're getting 25-pound bags of rice or beans, and grocery bags filled with family staples" such as peanut butter and soup, said Margie Baria, who delivers mail in Walnut Creek. "People are giving generously, and also in a very thoughtful way."

The drive sponsored by the National Association of Letter Carriers has been held annually since 1993, but this year's received extra emphasis given how the recession has made more people turn to community food banks for assistance.

At the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, for instance, 204,000 individuals last month were helped either through meals served at shelters and nonprofit agencies, or by receiving supplies through the food bank's Family Harvest program.

That's 20 percent more than last summer, "and it's going up every week," said Poppy Pembroke, communications manager for Second Harvest. "The thing is, last year we budgeted for a 3 percent increase."

The need prodded Bay Area letter carriers to aim for collecting 775,000 pounds of food on May 9 - well above last year's take of 650,000 pounds from residents and local businesses.

Besides postcards, the drive was publicized by such methods as a Thursday rally in San Mateo attended by politicians as well as postal employees. On Saturday, it appeared the efforts paid off.

"What I'm noticing is that the sizes of (individual) donations are larger," said Tito Claros, a letter carrier who helped coordinate efforts in San Mateo. "People went out and bought food for the drive. It's not just what they had on hand."

While some residents brought donations to their post offices, most donors left bags outside their front doors. If a mail delivery van filled up, the letter carriers detoured back to the post office before continuing their routes.

"Around noon we had one person come in with their whole vehicle filled with food," Baria said from



Walnut Creek. "One of the tires looked flat. When we took the food out, it popped right back up. That's how heavy it was."

For more information on donating food or receiving assistance, go to www.bayareahunger.org.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/10/BAST17HSJI.DTL>

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