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Food banks hope event Saturday delivers big

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen/ *Times-Herald* staff writer

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Saturday is a big hunger fighting day, with both a national food drive and a local grocery giveaway planned.

Bay Area food bank officials say the area is "immersed in a hunger epidemic," and are heavily counting on Saturday's 17th Annual Letter Carrier Food Drive to replenish dwindling supplies, according to www.bayareahunger.org.

"We're seeing across the board about a 30 percent increase at all our distribution sites in Solano and Contra Costa counties," said Lisa Sherrill of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. "We're serving about 98,000 people per month all together."

Sherrill and Napa County Food Bank director Shirley King blame the sagging economy for the rising number of hungry people.

"A lot of them tell us they've been laid off and are having trouble finding new jobs," Sherrill said.

"We're averaging more than 100 new people every month in Napa, which is our largest site, and these are people who have never sought help before," King said.

In American Canyon, where the food bank's distribution site recently reopened following the agency's vermin infestation and warehouse closure, the situation has some peculiar wrinkles, King said.

The food distribution site, at 2185 Elliott Drive, while again open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays, is only distributing food vouchers until a new warehouse is found, King said.

"In American Canyon we have a lot of people losing their homes, and we're seeing a lot of large, multi-family households now, and not everyone is working," she said.

"The food budget is often the first casualty in an economic downturn," she said. "Where they might have gone out and gotten a steak, they get chicken instead, and if not chicken then it becomes mac and cheese and then it's just rice."

Foods banks Bay Area-wide are experiencing similar increased need, according to bayareahunger.org.

"The evidence is overwhelming," Suzan Bateson, Alameda County Community Food Bank executive director said in a prepared statement. "We've crossed the threshold that separates hard times from a hunger epidemic."

To "help meet the needs of our neighbors," American Canyon's Bread of Life Church is holding its third annual food giveaway Saturday at the Holiday Inn Express, 5001 Main St., said Pastor Stuart Welch. Only those pre-qualified can get food at the event, though food donations are still being accepted and people can call 319-4703 to be approved, he said.

The event will run from 6 to 9 p.m. and the plan is to distribute \$5,000 in groceries to needy families, Welch said.

"We have invited the American Canyon Family Resource Center, the Vallejo Family Resource Center and Puertas Abiertas from Napa, as well as other

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families from our local community," he said. "This is our third annual event and the request for groceries is growing every day in the midst of the nation's economic crunch."

Many food bank officials are counting on Saturday's National Association of Letter Carriers' Food Drive, according to the statement.

The letter carrier food drive is second in size only to the annual holiday food drive in the Napa area. "It's what gets us through the summer," King said.

It's something the letter carriers support, said a Vallejo postal employee who asked not to be identified.

"(Postal workers) contribute as much as they can, and feel good after the event," she said.

Last year some 20,000 pounds of food was collected in Napa alone, King said.

While food donations are up in Solano County, demand still threatens to outstrip supply, Sherrill said.

"In Solano County, there's been a 33 percent increase in households served in our Food Assistance Program -- our USDA food distribution," she said. "The letter carrier drive is the largest of the year for us next to the annual fall Boy Scout drive."

The Food Assistance Program, which distributes food monthly from various locations, requires income verification, Sherrill said.

On Saturday, Contra Costa/Solano County food bank officials hope to get 200,000 pounds of food, she said. People are urged to put nonperishable food donations by their mailboxes Saturday morning before their regular delivery time, she said.

The 7,500 Bay Area letter carriers participating Saturday hope to collect 775,000 pounds of food, to provide about 600,000 meals, the statement notes.

"We're in urgent need of the incredible support we received from the NALC drive this year more than ever," said Larry Sly, executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. "We've never seen demand on this level."

"If everyone could just put out one can, it could really make a difference," Sherrill said.

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