

## Letter carriers' food drive comes up Saturday

By Sam Richards

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The biggest one-day food drive in the nation, the 17th Annual National Association of Letter Carriers' Drive, takes place the morning of Saturday, May 9.

On that morning, postal patrons — residences or businesses — throughout all East Bay counties may simply leave a box or bag of non-perishable food items by their mailbox. The letter carriers then take the donated food to collection bins at one of 140 Bay Area post offices. From there, the food is trucked to the local county's food bank, where it is weighed, sorted and distributed to a vast network of food pantries, soup kitchens and community agencies.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and the Alameda County Food Bank are two of the key recipients.

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

In January, U.S. Department of Agriculture distribution sites in eastern Contra Costa County doled out 81 percent more food than the same month a year earlier. A food hotline at the Alameda County Food Bank has doubled its call volume in the past two years.

"The evidence is overwhelming," said Alameda

County Community Food Bank executive director Suzan Bateson. "We've crossed the threshold that separates hard times from a hunger epidemic."

In 2008, the letter carriers' drive collected 650,000 pounds of food for the seven Bay Area county food banks that operate under the banner of Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest), the national association of food banks headquartered in Chicago. Despite an abysmal economy — and a three-year trend of shrinking donations to the drive — the 7,500 letter carriers participating in the Bay Area have set their sights on collecting 775,000 pounds on May 9. That would provide approximately 600,000 meals.

— Sam Richards

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