

Food Truck Trend Reaches All

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Free fresh fruits and vegetables will soon be distributed from a mobile "food truck," rotating among three Martinez locations. Up to six times a month, any resident who needs help keeping nutritious food on the table can pull up to the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano's new mobile community produce program and take their fill.

Instead of hawking pricey asian fusion tacos or gourmet cupcakes, Food Bank employees staffing the food truck will be handing out fruits and vegetables such as celery, carrots, onions, oranges, melons and potatoes from bins lining the inside of a converted beverage delivery truck.

"The program is really based on the fact that we have huge amounts of fresh produce available to us at the Food Bank," Larry Sly, executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, told the City Council during a presentation on Wednesday night. Speaking on the 40 percent increase in the number of county residents served by the Food Bank in the past four years, Sly outlined the coming program and encouraged residents to take advantage of the Food Bank's connections to get cost-free fresh food.

Expected to be fully up and running by the end of August, the program features a mobile pantry appearing at the Boys & Girls Club on Alhambra Ave., Las Juntas Elementary School on Pacheco Ave., and a yet-to-be-determined location somewhere downtown.

"It's a discussion we're having now, trying to get one of the union halls to let us use their parking lot for a third site," Sly said in a phone interview Thursday.

Residents are asked to bring their own bags and take as much as they need.

While there are income guidelines to the coming program, "we're not making people bring in documentation but just say this is who we are trying to reach," said Sly. "If people want to cheat the system, we're fine with that. We'll be going to low income neighborhoods, we're handing out fresh produce, we think that's a good thing."

The target audience, said Sly, is single individuals earning \$20,663 per year or less (or up to \$1,723 per month) and \$42,643 for a family of four. But none of the staff will ask to see proof of income or even I.D. – they'll just ask participants to sign a form agreeing to terms of service.

The John Muir Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund is financing the new program. The Food Bank will use the funding to buy fruits and vegetables from large agriculture producers, and plans to distribute roughly three-million pounds of produce in the first year.

Due to its membership in the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB), the organization has access to produce that otherwise wouldn't be selected for display on major grocery chain shelves.

In explaining how it works, Sly said the CAFB approached orange growers to offer to buy oranges that were too large, too small, discolored or otherwise "flawed" in the eyes of supermarket buyers. Instead of selling those fruits to juice manufacturers, the growers sell them to the CAFB, which in turn distributes the produce to the state's food banks.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano also operates a USDA surplus food distribution program at the Boys & Girls Club on the first Monday of every month from 10 a.m. to noon. The organization's website, ww.foodbankccs.org, provides details on all of its programs and services.