

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

# New group delivers excess food to those in need across Contra Costa County

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Siamack Sioshansi, left, of The Urban Founders, and White Pony Express coordinators Erica Brooks load a pick-up truck with apples recently picked up at an orchard behind the old Mudds Restaurant that closed on Park Place in San Ramon, Calif., on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2013. The new service run by all volunteers aims at getting all of the wasted food in Contra Costa County to those in need. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

WALNUT CREEK -- White Pony Express has been in business less than two weeks and has already delivered more than one ton of apples, hundreds of loaves of bread and 20 ready-to-eat meals to those in need.

The new nonprofit organization is run completely by volunteers, toting the goods from donor orchards, stores and restaurants -- in their own vehicles -- to people who may otherwise go without.

And White Pony's mission is simple: "We want to help end hunger in Contra Costa County," said Gary Conner, one of the nonprofit's co-organizers.

"When you are hungry, your life can start feeling very small, but life is big," he said. "We want to help take some of that away."

People should not have to choose between eating or paying their rent or mortgage in Contra Costa County, he said.

Recipients are from all over Contra Costa, from rescue missions and respite care facilities to homeless assistance groups.

Chris Dikes, Bay Area Rescue Mission culinary manager, feeds 800 people a day. All food is welcome, but a group that will deliver it to your door is fantastic.

"It's a free service; you just don't find that anymore," he said.

The mission has drivers who pick up food from donors, but "someone going out of their way to help our situation, it's amazing. It's how we will survive."

The small group of volunteers spent the summer identifying the need, hearing from various groups, including the Bay Area Rescue Mission in Richmond and a small church in Pittsburg that feeds 100 seniors lunch every day. The greatest need, volunteers discovered, was for more fresh fruits and vegetables and food that could be delivered, Conner said.

Armed with 112 volunteers pegged as dispatchers and runners, White Pony organizers are ready to expand their donor list. Donors can be restaurants, bakeries, delis, cafeterias and grocery stores that have excess food. They call a hotline and leave a message detailing their donation.

Within two hours, a dispatcher deploys another volunteer to pick up the goods. Speed is important, because when it comes to fresh fruits and vegetables, the group must be able to get the food to recipients as quickly as possible, said Erica Brooks, a coordinator with White Pony Express.

"We are providing a service both ways -- for the recipients by giving them the food they need and for donors taking their unwanted food," she said.

Already, Urban Farmers of Lafayette has harvested fruit and vegetables that White Pony Express delivered. Other donors include Noah's Bagels, La Boulange, The Cheesecake Factory and most recently Sprouts Farmers Market in Walnut Creek.

Locally in Contra Costa and Solano counties, the food bank estimates that 1 in 4 people are struggling with hunger. There are programs like this in other cities such as San Francisco, but this is a first in Contra Costa, according to Conner and Brooks.

And the service is completely free, both to donors and recipients. Those who volunteer to drop off and pick up give not only their time but their gas, Conner said.

"We don't get anything out of it but the joy of providing ... it's a beautiful experience," said Conner, who also picks up and drops off food.

White Pony Express was started by members of Sufism Reoriented, a small religious group in the unincorporated area of Walnut Creek known as Saranap. But Conner is quick to say this new food service is not an attempt by Sufis to gain attention or attract new members -- in fact, they do not proselytize, he said.

But there is a Sufi belief behind this movement. Members believe in "not creating more but sharing what is already there," Conner said.

This is not the first time that members of Sufism Reoriented founded nonprofit organizations. Sufis started Hospice of the East Bay, the Contra Costa County Rape Crisis Center and the School of Holistic Studies at John F. Kennedy University. In 10 to 15 years, Conner said he could see White Pony Express being taken over and run completely separately from Sufism.

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White Pony Express

What: Picks up leftover or unwanted food and delivers it within two hours to homeless groups, care centers, churches, food banks and rescue missions.

Where: They pick up throughout Contra Costa County.

When: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day

How: To donate, call 925-322-0604. For more information go to <http://whiteponyexpress.org>.