

Local food providers look into collaboration

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With 18 community organizations giving out food and meals on a regular basis all year long, it's a wonder that hunger remains an unresolved issue in Vallejo.

According to the Food bank of Contra Costa and Solano more than 21,800 people who live under the poverty level in Vallejo are not receiving food services. And the number might be more with the transient nature of the homeless population.

A new effort is underway to pinpoint the gaps, and what can be done to patch them.

"Is there a perfect system?" Caitlin Sly, the food bank program's director, asked rhetorically at a recent standing room-only summit in Vallejo.

At the Vallejo Hunger Summit, community leaders from various organizations addressed the issue.



Representatives from various groups serving low-income families and the homeless meet at North Bay Foursquare Church in Vallejo with representatives of the United Way to discuss strategies for dealing with hunger in Vallejo. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)



Larry Sly, executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, outlines some of the ideas brainstormed during a recent summit at North Bay Foursquare Church in Vallejo dealing with the community issue of hunger, particularly in low-income families and the homeless. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

The meeting was hosted by the Community Action Partnership Solano, the United Way of the Bay Area, the food bank, and other Solano County partners.

At the summit, the first to address Vallejo-specific issues, the organizations' representatives agreed that there is a lack of collaboration.

"What we see is that there's so many resource providers, but there's no coordination," Vallejo City Councilman Bob Sampayan said.

Although food is available almost every day of the week, its is distributed at different parts of town, making it difficult to access for those without means of transportation.

"We are working from the nonprofit sector side ... to make it more in line and more efficient," said Laura Escobar of the United Way of the Bay Area, which provides funding to the food bank.

Issues

Michelle Deuz runs the food pantry at the NorthBay Foursquare Church in East Vallejo. Deuz said even though the church formally opens the food pantry only twice a month, it provides food more often than that.

"We have people knocking on our door every week," Deuz said. "And we don't turn anyone away."

Deuz said she understands the need since the nearest full grocery store in the area is five miles away, and many of the low-income residents lack a car.

"We've had someone pick up food for eight of their neighbors because they don't have a car," Deuz said at the summit.

Sampayan said the problem is two-fold.

"We'd like to see people get food, but most importantly nourishing food," he said. "Children are eating doughnuts (from a convenience store) for breakfast. Is that nourishing?"

Variation of food also causes an issue in food distribution.

At most food pantries, each family will receive a box of canned goods, rice, beans and the occasional fresh produce.

"Are the things you take home the things you chose yourself?" Solano County Supervisor Erin Hannigan said. "When you go to a grocery store, you have a choice."

A Vallejo food distribution provider said she has even seen people throwing away things they don't want from the boxes

Possible solutions

Sampayan said he, Mayor Osby Davis, Hannigan and other officials and community organizations are seeking a site for a full-service day center to provide shelter and other resources, including food, for the homeless community in Vallejo.

However, the homeless population is not the only ones that need help.

Hannigan said there is a high need in the downtown area where low-income, multi-family and elderly housing is located.

"The food desert is where there's the highest need, and that's not OK," she said.

What is important, she said, is to create a dignified way to provide food assistance for families in need.

"There's a lot that can be combined," Hannigan said. "I don't know if it's as much a money issue as looking at it on a different perspective."

Community leaders agreed that a few centralized locations -- created by combining resources -- to provide services in different parts of the city would better serve the community.

"There's always people who don't want to go to food pantry," said Escobar of the United Way of the Bay Area. "But we want to make it as accessible as possible for people, and it'll be there if they need it."