

Giving Tree: Vaca food pantries fill more than empty bellies



In a Fairfield warehouse of the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano, volunteer John Capelli of Concord packs up fresh carrots that will be distributed by the food bank, one of the nominees for this year's Mary Lou Wilson Memorial Giving Tree. Joel Rosenbaum -- The Reporter

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Produce is ready to be distributed by the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano at its Fairfield warehouse. Joel Rosenbaum -- The Reporter

There are few ways to more immediately affect the lives of the poor than to give to agencies that help to feed them.

And while state and Solano County jobless rates continue to fall month by month, to 5.8 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively, in October, as the economy recovers, the number of people seeking donated bags of groceries, daily or monthly, at several Vacaville food pantries has, oddly enough, stayed about the same since the Great Recession began in 2007, say those who feed the hungry across the city.

A visit this fall to any of the local pantries is to witness poverty and hunger in high relief, not as some abstract academic concept debated on a nightly cable TV chat show. It could be a person, a disabled man or woman, whose cupboards are, quite literally, bare; or a homeless man trying to eat enough to generate body heat to stave off freezing nights. It could be a jobless person whose livelihood disappeared during yet another nationwide

corporate downsizing and who is still searching for work — or, maybe, dispirited and with no prospects for new job training, has given up; or a family whose combined paychecks, likely coming from minimum-wage or seasonal jobs, just do not stretch far enough after filling the car with gas, buying new warm clothing for growing children, paying the landlord, paying for utilities and telephone.

And for those food pantries that periodically buy some food from food banks — such as the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano in Fairfield — rising food prices have strained budgets, coming at a time, too, when supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries and other food businesses can no longer afford to have too much excess on hand for pickups by food pantry volunteers.

Since she began working some years ago at The Storehouse, an East Monte Vista Avenue distribution center for food and clothing to needy families in Vacaville, site manager Samantha Robinson said the overall daily count of those passing through the pantry's doors, some 120 to 150, has increased slightly. Those who qualify for a once-monthly bag of groceries, under a USDA program, has grown to nearly 1,200, she noted.

As with most pantries, new clients are required to fill out an application and provide proof that they live in Vacaville (a government-issued ID card, utility bill, etc.), she noted.

“You do not have to go hungry in Vacaville,” said Robinson, one of two paid workers — the other is warehouse manager Andy Brown — at The Storehouse, a ministry of The Father's House, a large Christian church with congregations in Vacaville, Napa and Pleasant Hill. Most workers at the pantry are volunteers.

As clients walked around the spacious pantry to fill up their daily bags, the shelves were filled with canned food, bread products (bagels, sliced bread, rolls, hamburger and hot dog buns), some dairy products and fresh produce and fruit, such as kale and Granny Smith apples, green beans, bananas, pomegranates. Sundries, such as shampoo, hygiene products, disposable diapers, etc., can be included in the once-monthly bag, said Robinson.

The fresh food belies a criticism of food pantries and food banks, that they are largely repositories for processed food, larded with unhealthy levels of salt, sugar and fat, castoffs from corporate donors. Robinson challenged the assessment.

“I do know that it's not bad food,” she said. “There's so much green groceries that come here now.”

The Storehouse also gets some meat products, including cold cuts, chicken and pork, but clients are allowed only one meat item per visit.

“Meat is a big deal here,” said Robinson. “We make sure that they have access for protein.”

Most of the food, of course, is not fresh from the farm or processing plant, Brown acknowledged, noting that he pays close attention to “sell by” and “expiration” dates, a key difference.

If the food, especially canned food, appears to have reached its expiration date or seems to be on the verge of spoiling, it gets discarded, he said.

“We have a saying around here: ‘When in doubt, throw it out,’” said Brown. “We’re really diligent about making sure that people are not going to get something that will make them sick.”

Fresh produce and fruit — some of it coming from the Vaca Produce Pipeline, a volunteer group that gathers food from neighborhood yards and gardens — is also available at St. Mary’s Food Locker, a Stinson Avenue pantry that is an adjunct of St. Mary’s Catholic Church.

There, coordinator and volunteer Lynn Gallagher oversees a large group of volunteers, who distribute food to the needy and hungry five days a week, including during Thursday evening hours.

The pantry’s ample food stocks are the result of “generous donations” from Vacaville residents, she said.

In an interview on a cool Thursday night, Gallagher said food pantries satisfy more than just empty bellies. They improve people’s lives.

“I like to think that we’re purveyor’s of mutual respect,” she said. “That we’re helpful and pleasant. We also help them to learn to be patient.”

The latter statements refers to the way food is handed out to the needy at St. Mary’s, in a way that separates it from other food pantries: One person at a time is allowed in the small distribution area, about the size of a small bedroom. The food locker serves about 20 to 25 people each day it is open.

Like the Storehouse, St. Mary’s makes sure families receive some dairy products in each food bag and sometimes a protein-rich meat item.

It has only been in the last several years that an increasing amount of fresh produce has been made available, noted Gallagher, adding that nutrition awareness has arrived at food pantries in general.

For the most part, St. Mary’s Food Locker buys its food from the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano (and delivers it), and some grocery stores, among them WinCo Foods, Grocery Outlet and Costco. Volunteer drivers who load the food into their vehicles donate their time and gas, Gallagher pointed out.

Like some food pantries, St. Mary’s also offers pet food to clients, thinking that the poor also need help to feed their animals and might neglect their animals otherwise if they fall upon still-harder times, she added.

Like St. Mary’s, the Vaca FISH pantry is staffed by a cadre of volunteers and depends on private donations — or donations from supermarkets or from the Vaca Produce Pipeline — to feed the hungry, said office manager Valerie Meyer.

“We just got a check from a man who came in and gave us \$450!” she gushed during an interview earlier this month.

The pantry serves residents of Vacaville, Elmira and Allendale, and clients must show proof of residency in order to receive assistance and are served only once every 30 days, Meyer said.

Working out of a series of small Eldridge Street rooms rented from the city of Vacaville, Vaca FISH (Friends in Service Helping) doles out canned and boxed food primarily, but also some fresh produce and fruit, rice, oatmeal, pasta, frozen chicken and hotdogs, she said.

Amounts per person can vary, depending on the size of the family, said Meyer, who supervises some 20 volunteers and has worked at the pantry for five years.

Meyer said the primary currency at Vaca FISH, which is not affiliated with a church, is honesty.

“We have to take a person’s word that they need food,” she said, adding that some 180 families per month walk through the doors to pick up food. “We don’t ask for proof of income.”

While most of the cash donations pay for food, some pays for office rent and some necessary office supplies. A lone volunteer with a truck, who pays for his own gas, picks up food on days when it is available or purchased at grocery stores, said Meyer.

“We’re very cautious with our money,” she noted. “You don’t have to worry that donations of money are going to be wasted,” or spent on administrative costs.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano, with a branch office and warehouse in Fairfield, services area food pantries, which, in turn, deliver food to the hungry in their respective communities, said Larry Sly, a 40-year food bank employee.

In many ways, the story of the food bank is told in numbers, and Sly was quick to tick them off during an interview at his office on Courage Drive (the main office is in Concord).

The food bank’s annual budget currently tops \$11 million, with half of that amount coming from individuals. Other amounts come from businesses, “faith communities and organizations,” said Sly.

Every month, nearly 200,000 people are helped by the food bank, at community sites “and through a network of about 180 partner agencies,” he noted.

Amazingly, the food bank distributed some 20 million pounds of food last year, more than half of which was fresh fruits and vegetables, enough for 16 million meals, said Sly, who started out as a truck driver.

Time and circumstance affect everyone and everything, and he said that, over the years, grocery outlets and the rise of day-old bread stores “has affected the food bank,” a member of the California Association of Food Banks.

Every day, some 30 to 80 volunteers may show up to work at the cavernous warehouses.

Food sources include large grocery chains, but the food bank must pay for shipping charges. It also receives fresh produce and fruit from neighborhood gleaning groups and private farms. If the donation is sufficiently large enough, the food bank will send a driver and truck to pick it up.

Inside the warehouses, a forklift driver maneuvers among stacks shrink-wrapped pallets piled high to the 40-foot ceiling. There are pallets of canned goods, from soup and sliced fruit to salmon and tomato sauce. In one corner are pallets of California raisins in sturdy cardboard boxes.

Sly said the number of needy and hungry has grown “significantly” since 2008, as the Great Recession took hold.

“Surprisingly, the numbers have not gone down,” he said, adding that the needy today sometimes include two families living in a home meant for half that number at the most.

AREA FOOD PANTRIES AND BANKS THAT SERVE VACAVILLE AND SURROUNDING AREAS (a partial list):

1. The Storehouse: Open five days, 10 a.m. to noon, except for Wednesdays, when hours are 4 to 6 p.m., 1146 E. Monte Vista Ave., Vacaville. Call 454-0268, or visit www.vacavillestorehouse.org.
2. St. Mary’s Food Locker: Open five days, 10 to 11:45 a.m., except for Thursdays, when hours are 5 to 7 p.m., (At St. Mary’s Catholic Church) 350 Stinson Ave., Vacaville. Call 448-2390 (main church office).
3. Vaca FISH (Friends in Service Helping): Open 10 a.m. to noon Tuesdays to Fridays, 40 Eldridge Ave., Suite 9, Vacaville. Call 447-5482, or visit www.vacafish.org.
4. Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano: 2339 Courage Drive, Fairfield, call 1-855-309-FOOD (3663), or email Info@foodbankscs.org

GIVING TREE GOAL: \$1,000 for each food bank.