

Thompson tours Vallejo “life-saver” Faith Food Fridays site



Full-time student and Vallejo resident Mary Fitzgerald explains to U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson why it's important that anti-hunger programs like the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and Faith Food Fridays are supported — something she knows from personal experience. RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN — TIMES-HERALD

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RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN — TIMES-HERALD

U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson listens to Faith Food Fridays Ministry Director Benjamin Buggs, explain how his program works, as they chat near the free books shelf and other items available for those in need.

Not everyone who relies on programs like Vallejo's Faith Food Fridays to supplement their food budget are homeless or ne'er-do-wells – some are the struggling working poor or people whose circumstances prevent regular jobs.

That's the message a group of women connected to the The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano wanted to make clear to Rep. Mike Thompson at the Solano Avenue facility where he took a tour on Tuesday.

Faith Food Fridays, which now also distributes food on Tuesdays, serves more than 350 families weekly, most of them regular folks who sometimes "have more month than money," Faith Food Fridays' Ministry Director Benjamin Buggs said.

Those seeking help there are assigned a number, participate in a Bible study, and are then left to "shop" for the available free merchandize of all kinds, from clothes and shoes, to bedding and books, that have been donated to the organization, he said.

"When we first started, we had six items of clothing," he said. "We're Macy's, now."

Impressed, Thompson mentioned he may go through his own closets and send some of his family's extra clothes to the agency. His local representative, Mel Orpilla, made a similar remark.

The agency also offers free haircuts, besides the food and Buggs said there are plans to expand and upgrade the building.

Thompson, Orpilla and others, then sat at a table and heard from the food bank representatives.

Advocacy Manager Carly Finkle said she hoped to share with Thompson the stories of some of the women who count on these services.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano serves 190,000 individuals every month through Food Bank distributions and partnerships with 180 community agencies like Faith Food Fridays, she said.

Vallejo resident Patricia Romero-Aguasvivas, shared her story of needing this help after being downsized from AT&T after 29 ½ years as a manager.

“I ran out of money,” she said. “At 61, I’m too young for Social Security and too old to find a job. This is what I have to live on.”

Mary Fitzgerald is a mom and a full-time student studying sociology and criminal justice, who said that the food bank and Faith Food Fridays make it possible to get through the month, by bridging the gap” between the income and the need.

“It’s not just the homeless,” she said. “It’s even working people. I want to ask you to think about us – those of us struggling to make ends meet – when you vote on these types of issues. We need you to advocate for us.”

Finkle said she wanted Thompson to put some faces and individual stories to the statistics, to help him fight threatened cuts to anti-hunger programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP,) or food stamps.

“Anything you can do to represent the Vallejo community and the rest of the Bay Area who really need these programs,” she said.

Thompson indicated his heart is already in their camp.

“I think (Faith Food Fridays) is a phenomenal thing,” he said. “When you get the community helping the community there is a spirit, there; and, when people get help they might not otherwise get; I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say this is a life-saver.”