

Pantries struggle with more needy, less food

Tom Abate, Chronicle Staff Writer

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(09-29) 17:59 PDT -- A free food pantry that ran out of supplies last week was restocked Monday in time to give Senobia Garcia of Pittsburg some milk, beans and canned fruit to supplement the \$400 a week her husband brings home to support their family of five.

Food giveaways like Concord's Monument Crisis Center are struggling to keep their shelves stocked as soaring prices and growing unemployment drive more families to desperation.

"Last September, we served 4,000 people, and this September we're up to 6,000 people," said Sandra Scherer, executive director of the Crisis Center on Concord's Monument Boulevard corridor.

When the center's shelves went bare on Wednesday, Scherer raised the alarm, prompting help that ranged from a \$25,000 matching grant from Chevron Corp. to 480 pounds of backyard fruit collected by high school students in a food drive organized by Alamo business woman Alisa Corstorphine.

"It just takes one person to coordinate a collection," said Corstorphine, who recruited a dozen students with a notice in the San Ramon High School bulletin.

The Monument Crisis Center is one of 184 distribution points affiliated with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties. Spokeswoman Lisa Sherrill said the two-county Food Bank has seen systemwide demand surge about 20 percent this year, with some 98,000 people currently getting supplemental food aid.

Food banks around the Bay Area are buckling under the same crushing need - and asking volunteers and donors to pick up some of the load.

At the Alameda Community Food Bank, executive director Suzan Bateson funnels protein and produce through 300 pantries and soup kitchens that serve about 230,000 people a year - roughly 4 in 10 of whom are children. Some of these distribution centers have been

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running out of food in the face of increased demand, or else shorting bags to stretch their allotments so no one leaves empty-handed.

"These are working families with one or two minimum-wage jobs where the parents don't have enough money to buy gas and food," Bateson said.

In San Francisco, distribution outlets like the Ingleside Community Center that once helped feed 120 families have seen the number of regulars jump past 150. San Francisco Food Bank spokeswoman Marguerite Nowak said their network of 192 local outlets now reaches about 17,000 families a week.

"We're getting hit from every direction. Our need is up at the same time that food prices make it harder for us to buy supplies," Nowak said, citing eggs, up a third in the last year, milk up 30 percent and bread about 15 percent.

Another blow has been the declining purchasing power of the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program. In 2002, Congress allocated \$140 million nationwide to buy and give away such items as rice, beans, pasta and peanut butter. Nowak said that in fiscal year 2003 the local share of that outlay enabled the San Francisco Food Bank to give away 3.8 million pounds of staples. By the current fiscal year, proceeds from the program enabled the food bank to dispense just 1.6 million pounds of foodstuffs.

Nowak said Congress recently boosted the food program's outlay to \$250 million and indexed it for inflation so those numbers will soon rise. Bay Area food pantries need donations and volunteers to keep filling bags.

At the Monument Crisis Center, 67-year-old Maria Visintini collected checks in person from neighbors in Pleasant Hill to say thanks for the food she got when she was down on her luck.

"It is very important not to feel like a beggar or a charity case," she said.

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