

"Second Harvest's Recipe: Fresh Food For The Hungry"

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By Margaret Steen

Around noon on a rainy Monday, Second Harvest driver Curtis Boyle arrives at EHC LifeBuilders and unloads about 1,000 pounds of food from his refrigerated truck: clover sprouts, asparagus, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, ground sirloin, cinnamon rolls, vanilla meringue cookies, dozens and dozens of eggs.

Many cooks might be stumped by how to turn this assortment of goods into dinner for the 250 people who are staying at EHC's homeless shelter in San Jose. But Larry Wilson, the night cook, has a plan: Most of the meat and vegetables will be boiled into a stew. The ground meat will be frozen for spaghetti sauce another day. Baked goods will be dessert or breakfast.

The food is part of Fresh Rescue, a program where the non-profit Second Harvest distributes perishable food from two San Jose Albertsons stores that is too old to be sold but still safe to eat. The pilot program started in December.

The program offers benefits all around: Unsold meat, dairy products and produce go into the mouths of hungry people instead of the trash can. Second Harvest's client agencies get additional food -- in the form of sought-after perishable products instead of the usual canned goods. And Albertsons gets a potential tax deduction.

``As fundraising becomes tougher and tougher, we're trying to be creative about new solutions to getting perishable products,'' said Beth DeWolf, director of development for Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties.

Right now, the launch program costs little more than a redistribution of staff time, truck maintenance and gas. But Second Harvest found out this week that it will receive \$100,000 a year for three years from Adobe Systems to help expand its distribution of perishable products.

Still, the program shows how many challenges still stand in the way of one of the most basic of charitable missions: getting food to people in time for them to eat it.

Each weekday morning, a Second Harvest driver picks up food at each store, takes it back to the warehouse to weigh it, then delivers it to a client agency. The program is on track to distribute 180,000 pounds of food this year, said Jim Livermore, who manages the program for Second Harvest.

That's not much compared with the 27 million pounds of food Second Harvest distributes each year. But Albertsons has 45 stores in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, where Second Harvest operates, so the program has the potential to expand.

Albertsons has similar programs in other cities, including Seattle and Chicago. In Chicago, for example, the program has expanded to include a majority of Albertsons stores, said spokeswoman Quyen Ha.

DeWolf said the group may use some of the grant funding it has received to go to Seattle and observe the operations of the highly successful program there.

Getting the program working in San Jose has meant overcoming a number of logistical hurdles. The food has to be picked up frequently; Second Harvest can't simply wait until a store has an entire truckload of produce or milk to donate. Likewise, it has to be distributed to agencies quickly.

``There's so much food out there, but you need the trucking, the driver staffing, the storage space available,'' Livermore said.

The trucks themselves are expensive -- Livermore estimated that one refrigerated truck could cost more than \$70,000 -- and that doesn't include the cost of hiring a driver or maintaining the truck.

Picking up the food from the stores is a labor-intensive process as well.

``It's not like it's in cases ready to go,'' Livermore said. ``It's got to be manually transferred into boxes for our truck.''

DeWolf said Second Harvest is exploring how to improve the program, especially now that it will have more money: buying more trucks, hiring more drivers, buying a truck with a scale in it so the food doesn't have to be brought back to the warehouse for weighing before it goes to the agencies.

A longer-term concern about similar programs might be that Albertsons and other grocers are constantly working to improve their ordering so they don't have leftover food. But despite technology such as scanners, experts say the day when grocery stores will have exactly the right amount of food in stock at all times may never arrive.

``Weather, world affairs, traffic, an accident on the Bayshore -- all kinds of things can impact how much gets sold and what time it gets sold,'' said George Whalin, president and chief executive officer of Retail Management Consultants in San Marcos. ``With things like perishables, it's a very difficult guessing game.''

In fact, Whalin said, consumers' increasing emphasis on foods that don't take much preparation may mean even more perishable food on grocers' shelves.

``Consumers are looking for convenience. They don't have time to cut up carrots,'' he said. ``The deli departments have become a very big and very important part of supermarkets today.''