

## Food bank strives for record goal Redwood Empire kicks off annual drive



Austin Gurule of Sebastopol's True to Life Children Services and Maggie Sumner of Burbank Housing cruise the aisles for food Wednesday at the Redwood Empire Food Bank in Santa Rosa. Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

researchers pegged the number of food insecure in Sonoma County at about 21,000 people. Of these, roughly 10,000 reported having severe hunger-related symptoms.

Many of the food insecure are families working one, two or three jobs and still not making ends meet, Goodman said.

The cream of chicken soup, carrots and apples on the food bank's shelves are, in many cases, what keep area residents full.

"Hunger is prevalent here just like everywhere else in the country," Goodman said. "Every school has children who are a part of low-income families. Hunger is in every single neighborhood."

According to the Food Research and Action Center, a national nonprofit food aid organization, more than 35 million people in the United States live in households where a good meal is not guaranteed.

By LAURA NORTON  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

There are gaping holes between pallets of milk and vegetable broth at the Redwood Empire Food Bank's Santa Rosa warehouse, a sign of how quickly food moves through there.

Each week, trucks bring cans of peas from DelMonte on the Central Coast and frozen lasagnas from Amy's Kitchen in Santa Rosa to fill these spaces. But as fast as food comes in, local organizations carry it out to serve Sonoma County's hungry residents.

Today, with an increasing number of organizations using the food bank as their main provider, the facility is kicking off its annual holiday food drive with a record goal: to collect 200,000 pounds of food and \$160,000.

"Our inability to meet these goals means we will only be able to provide less healthy food for people in need, said David Goodman, executive director of the food bank.

"People who are hungry might get a loaf of bread and some potatoes as opposed to oranges or grapefruits. We've been there before and we hope to never be there again," he said.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank serves 50,000 people, part of the 94,000 area residents Goodman says are touched by hunger in some way.

A 2002 study by UCLA

The Redwood Empire Food Bank makes local donations such as canned goods and other items directly available to 128 local food pantries, shelters and other assistance programs. Cash donations to the food bank are used to purchase supplies in bulk from across the nation.

Because of agreements with manufacturers, every dollar the food bank spends brings five dollars worth of merchandise into Sonoma County.

"You get a large bang for your buck at the food bank," said Linda Swan, program director of The Living Room, a daytime drop-in center that serves approximately 80 homeless women and children in Santa Rosa.

Every week, Swan joins other food pantry, soup kitchen and nonprofit organization volunteers pushing large trolleys down the food bank's large aisles. Buying in bulk and paying by the pound, Swan chooses from a variety of foods every week, which change depending on what has been donated.

Some days it may be stew meat, others broccoli. Usually, Swan said, she is able to fill her car with enough groceries for her clients' breakfasts and lunches for a week for only \$11.

"Without the food bank, we would have to double our efforts," Swan said. "We would have to double our shopping and probably triple, or more than triple, what we spend."

Teddy Stone, a United Church of Christ in Petaluma food pantry volunteer, provides 25-pound bags of groceries to about 50 families a week, thanks to the food bank. Families, seniors and veterans all come to the church's Saturday morning distributions for help putting food on the table, she said.

Stone collects food donations such as canned goods from members of three local churches, but said she would not be able to meet Petaluma's needs without help from the food bank.

The Salvation Army also has launched a canned food drive to augment items from the food bank. The Salvation Army provides a holiday food distribution Dec. 15 at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds and more than 1,500 people are expected.

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