

CSA's bare cupboards spur call for help

Written by Mary Beth Hislop - Town Crier Staff Writer

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Photo Elliott Burr/Town Crier

Ladrea Clark, Community Services Agency food and nutrition assistant, surveys the non-profits empty shelves, normally packed with bread.

Just like Old Mother Hubbard's, the Community Services Agency's cupboards are bare, and the non-profit's Associate Director Maureen Wadiak is sounding the alarm. The organization, which provides food to local people in need, is in desperate need of edible donations itself – please.

"Hunger doesn't take a vacation," Wadiak said. "Our pantry shelves are bare."

It's a matter of simple mathematics – food donations are down 6 percent, and the people who need them have increased 14 percent. Moreover, the amount of food distributed to each client is down 17 percent, she said.

The bad news doesn't stop there. Many clients laid off more than six months ago have spent their cash reserves and are now on the streets.

"We're seeing an uptick in the number of homeless," Wadiak said. "The majority of them are in their cars right now – some with children."

Volunteers at the food pantry on Stierlin Road in Mountain View noted they serve approximately 150 people during each two-hour shift. With seven shifts each week, more than 1,000 visits are paid to CSA weekly.

"Twenty-five to 30 percent of those folks are homeless," she said.

Their situations create a need for healthful, high-protein and nonperishable food items, such as packaged crackers with peanut butter – "Things that are really nutritious and healthy," Wadiak said.

In past economic downturns, CSA volunteers have observed that people donated generously to help those less fortunate. Not this time. With daily news stories of company failures and job losses, Wadiak said people are holding tightly to their money.

"They may be thinking, 'Am I next?'" Wadiak said.

CSA had to suspend distributing \$25 shoe vouchers because the non-profit agency and individual donors that funded the program are financially challenged also, she said. In tracking the numbers, Wadiak said both stores and individuals have been forced to cut back donations.

Normally, canned food drives during the holiday season provide a food supply adequate enough to last through March, when excess fresh produce begins arriving from farmers' markets and backyard gardeners. But this year, the county has quarantined produce to prevent the spread of brown-apple moth larvae into the Central Valley.

"That's hampering getting healthful food out the door," she said.

There is some relief in sight. In a collaborative effort between the county agriculture department, CSA and Village Harvest (a volunteer organization that harvested nearly 122,000 pounds of fruit from backyards and small orchards last year in the greater Bay Area), the agency will begin accepting backyard produce 9-11 a.m. Tuesdays. A county agriculture inspector will examine the produce.

Those in need of food must be residents of Los Altos, Los Altos Hills or Mountain View and submit to an intake process that takes approximately 24-48 hours for approval, Wadiak said. Those who qualify can then pick up food bags 10 a.m. to noon and 2-4 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays and 2-4 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

"If they need to come five days a week, they can," Wadiak said.

In the meantime, CSA has scheduled its monthly Chefs Who Care fundraiser, 5:30-7:30 p.m. Aug. 17 at Cuesta Park in Mountain View. JW Catering will host the event, which costs \$20 in advance for adults, \$25 at the park and \$12/\$14 for children. Fifty percent of the proceeds support CSA's Food & Nutrition Center. Guests are encouraged to donate canned foods also.

CSA is located at 204 Stierlin Road, Mountain View. For more information, call 968-0836.

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