

Donations drive Food Bank and Crisis Center

ANDRÉ GENSBURGER
Clayton Pioneer

No one should have to go hungry, say Hugh Toloui and Jorg Westerheide, Clayton residents who donate time, money and services at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and the Monument Crisis Center.

"It is more than just giving people food," Toloui said. "Both these organizations require a lot of manpower to collect, sort and distribute food and other items to where it is needed."

INSPECTION AND REPACKAGING

The Tuesday Rotary volunteers sorted through six pallets with more than 200 boxes, with products ranging from canned goods to pharmaceuticals, canned and bottled beverages, to diapers and pet food. Each item is inspected to ensure that it is not leaking or opened before it is repacked. Canned goods without labels, glass items, soda and medicinal items cannot be used. Pet food finds its way to other agencies, including the animal shelter.

office to a warehouse facility across from Costco Gas.

"In our first year, even though we had a tiny space, we served 84 families," said executive director Sandra Scherer. "Now we serve 3,700 families."

Most of these families earn less than \$17,000 year, with an average income of \$800 to \$1,200 per month for a family of four. "You can't make it on that," Scherer said.

"Forty percent of our clients are single mothers of all ages," Scherer noted. "Over half of our clients are children."

who care can do," Toloui said.

"I do it because I can," Westerheide said. "It needs to be done."

Ed's Mudville Grill in Clayton also has been a donor for several years, as well as helping with annual fund-raising efforts.

"Even in Clayton, where there is a higher affluence, people would be surprised to find that their neighbors have needed our services," Scherer said. "Your child may be attending school with a child we have provided services for."

According to Scherer, getting government aid can be a long process. "That does not help you get food on the table today," she said. "Services at our center are immediate. You come in, complete an application and we go from there. Generally, you leave with groceries and supplies."

DONATIONS ALWAYS NEEDED

While food items remain the most donated, there are other things that are in far greater need. "Toilet paper is such a rare commodity that we even have to play Toilet Paper Bingo with our seniors," Scherer said. "People just assume that toilet paper is readily available. We desperately need it, along with other paper products."

There are 135 seniors in the Seniors Moment program, and they arrive for a morning of activities at the center with a social gathering afterward. When they leave, they take food as part of the brown bag program. This way, they interact with each other and many seniors volunteer as well.

"What they do with the seniors is wonderful," Toloui said. "Everybody can be useful, get self-worth."

Some of the volunteers



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HUGH TOLOUI AND LARRY HUTCHINGS, repack a box after inspecting each item.

started as clients. "We get many clients coming back when their lives have improved and many who continue to need help," Scherer said. "The Clayton Rotary raised money for computers that we have here for kids to use and also for people needing to type up resumes or look for work."

From the start of the "food chain," as a shopper places an item in one of the barrels at Safeway, to the brown shopping

bag picked up by a low-income individual, the gift given by many people along the way remains one of hope.

"Poverty doesn't know any city boundaries," Scherer said. "It can strike anywhere."

For additional information on the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, contact Lisa Sherrill at 771-1304. For information about donations and volunteering at the Monument Crisis Center, call Sandra Scherer at 825-7751.



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SUSANA CEREGHINO, VIOLET MCCLAUGHRY and Dr. Norman Luebke repack potatoes for distribution in front of a rack of completed grocery bags.

Each Tuesday morning, Toloui, Westerheide and other volunteers from the Clayton/Concord Sunrise Rotary spend a few hours sorting through hundreds of boxes of food donated from Safeway, as well as food drives. Safeway contributes about \$110 million worth of food yearly, from drives as well as "salvage" items that are no longer viable for sale due to dents, lack of popularity or approaching shelf-life expiration.

"The food is perfectly good," Westerheide said. "It would go to waste otherwise."

"Hunger relief is a very special concern for us," said Teena Massingill, manager for corporate and public affairs for Safeway.

According to executive director Larry Sly, the Food Bank helps feed more than 82,000 people each month. The Food Bank processes more than 8 million pounds of food each year in its 36,000 sq. ft. facility in Concord, enough for 6.4 million meals that are then routed to various agencies that rely on the Food Bank supply chain. The Monument Crisis Center in Concord is one of those agencies.

In the two-hour morning session, more than 80 percent of the items were reboxed for their next journey, by truck, to the Monument Crisis Center. There, they will be shelved by category and bagged for needy individuals, families, seniors and the homeless.

"We have been doing this for quite awhile," Toloui said. "It's often very difficult for people to get here, but we always need the help."

The sheer volume of the food processed by the Food Bank is staggering. As you walk through the warehouse and see the stacks of packaged boxes reaching the ceiling, you get an idea of the scope of the service provided by the various agencies that coordinate with the Food Bank. It's almost all volunteer-driven, although Toloui reports that some agencies pay for workers to come.

The scene serves as a reminder of the vast need that exists for this service, a need that continues to increase.

CRISIS CENTER EXPANDING

Now in its fourth year, the Monument Crisis Center has grown from a 10 sq. ft. foot

A VARIETY OF VOLUNTEERS

There are about 1,700 hours of volunteer time each month at the center, Scherer said. On this day, Starbucks supplied managers from local stores. Kim Schmidt, manager of the store on Olivera Street in Concord, is also on the Crisis Center's Board of Directors. She uses her connections to draw in from the Starbucks "family" to help at the center.

The volunteers are a welcome sight for Scherer, who makes a point of learning everyone's names and telling them how appreciative she is.

Students from area high schools, such as Carondelet and De La Salle, often come to help out. "It's an excellent learning experience for teens," Scherer said, "giving them the opportunity to learn skills while getting a chance to make a huge difference in someone's life."

The Grocery Outlet on Contra Costa Boulevard donates salvage items in addition to providing Thanksgiving turkeys. Harvest House, across the street from the center, orders huge pallets of rice and beans as needed by the center.

"It is amazing what people



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