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Food Bank Gears Up for Summer Demand

By [Tom Embrey](#) - Sunday, April 25, 2010

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It's late Thursday morning, and a nondescript 12,500-square-foot warehouse at the end of a dead-end street in Southern Pines is bustling.

Forklifts rumble and beep, unloading 18-wheelers and dropping pallets tacked with food throughout the largely empty warehouse, while volunteers scurry to sort items that will soon be packed and delivered.

Three hours later, the volunteers are gone. The once-bare warehouse on Sandy Avenue is now restocked with assorted food items.

It has a capacity to store more than 225 pallets in dry storage and 44 pallets of refrigerated/frozen food.

In less than a week, the warehouse again will be empty, and the process to fill it will begin again.

"Typically, we have times of the year like holidays when people think about food drives and donating, but the need for food is year-round," said Michael Cotten, outreach coordinator for the Sandhills branch of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

The food bank serves more than 104 partner agencies in 34 counties. The Sandhills branch supplies partner agencies in Moore, Richmond and Scotland counties. The branch also co-serves Lee County.

Last year alone, the Sandhills branch distributed more than four million pounds of food to its partner agencies. The agencies provide food for more than 250,000 children.

Meeting the needs of the community is a constant challenge.

Every dollar donated to the food bank generates \$8 worth of food, which translate into four meals, Cotten said. Additionally, 97 cents of every dollar donated goes directly for food and food programs.

"This community has stepped up to help, but as the community has stepped up to help, we've also seen that

need increase," Cotten said. "It is a balancing act."

Cotten said a struggling economy coupled with the fast-approaching end of the school year means that many more area residents, especially children, will be in need of food.

Making an Exception

He recalled a recent day when a woman came to the Sandhills branch late one Friday afternoon. The woman had just left a domestic violence shelter and was seeking food for herself and her children.

The Food bank typically -doesn't deal with individual cases, preferring to deliver food and other supplies to its numerous partner agencies. However, Cotten said, this was a special circumstance.

"She came to us and had children to care for and no food," he said. "When we have an emergency like that, people can't wait until Monday morning to find a food pantry, so we put together some food for her."

But the story didn't end there.

When the woman left, she hurried to her car because she had to pick up her children from day care, and she worried that she would be late and incur an additional charge that she couldn't afford to pay.

She got in her car and it wouldn't start.

"She was panicked and crying because she knew she didn't have the money to pay what the day care was going to charge her if she was late," Cotten said. "Fortunately, we were able to get her car started and she made it to the day care on time."

Summer Demand Peaks

Summer is a critical time of need for residents who depend on agencies that get their food from the food bank.

Food bank programs such as Kids' Summer Stock and a Summer Food Service Program are a couple of specific ones to address the increased need as the temperatures rise.

"These programs were started to reverse a trend of donations and supplies decreasing in the summer," Cotten said.

The programs provide food to children during the summer to help offset the loss of free and reduced-price lunches that the children receive during the school year.

To make donating food and money easy, representatives from the Sandhills Branch of the Food Bank will set up a booth at First Fridays, a family oriented, kid-friendly event that will be held in downtown Southern Pines on the first Friday of each month beginning in May and ending in October.

Cotten said some of the most needed items are canned meals, such as stews, soups, tuna, ravioli (pop-top lids are preferred whenever possible), peanut butter, cereals, canned fruits and vegetables, rice, pasta and dried beans.

The organization also accepts and needs donations of personal hygiene items, infant products, such as diapers and baby food, and paper products, such as paper towels and toilet paper.

"We do discourage any type of glass products," Cotten said. "Because things can get broken and if they do get cracked or broken we can have seepage, which can also damage other products."

The Summer Food Service program allows the food bank to partner with local agencies to deliver food to needy children.

Cotten said the program helps provide a nutritionally balanced meal that, hopefully, kids like.

"Each year, we learn a little bit more and try to improve the product that we provide," Cotten said. "We try to find product that is not only nutritional but also is something that the kids will eat. Efficiency is being able to find food that won't go to waste and food that kids like."

The newest venture undertaken by the food bank is a partnership with Meals on Wheels called Snack Pack Pals.

Similar to the Back Pack Pals program for children, the Snack Pack program will provide weekend meals to needy adults, mostly, but not limited to, seniors.

"If you are homebound and need a meal, they will get one to you," Cotten said.

The bags are packed at the warehouse and then delivered to 200 individuals enrolled in the program by volunteers.

Cotten anticipates the Snack Pack Pals program will soon be as successful as Back Pack Pals in the public schools. In 2009-2010, Back Pack Pals had more than 700 children enrolled from 21 schools. More than 150 volunteers helped fill backpacks more than 22,000 times.

Clearing Up Confusion

Serving the growing food needs of the community is no easy task.

The Sandhills branch employs five full-time staff members and relies on countless volunteers and year-round donations to help meet the needs of its 104 partner agencies and the public.

Cotten said one of the biggest problems facing the food bank is recognition. He says that too often people confuse the organization with a partner organization, not understanding what the food bank is all about.

The Sandhills branch has been in its current location on Sandy Avenue for seven years. But folks still don't know where local food bank is located, or exactly what its role is.

"We are the only food bank in our area," Cotten said. "Sometimes people get confused. They use food bank and food pantry interchangeably. As the food bank, we provide food for all our partner agencies. We are able to come here and get food."

Cotten said his organization is not in competition with its partner agencies, but said donations to the food bank serve a greater need than a donation to one single pantry.

"We are more diversified in our giving," Cotten said. "If you give to us, your donation is used here, but we also get support from a larger organization to subsidize the needs."

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