



Sandhills Food Bank Facing Difficult Times

BY TOM EMBREY: STAFF WRITER

The Sandhills branch of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina in Southern Pines is hungry for support.

A slumping economy, rising gas prices and the lingering effects of a drought have created an increased demand for assistance, said Peter Werbicki, director of the Food Bank.

"I've been with the organization for 11 years, and now is the most acute increase of demand for our services outside of a natural disaster," Werbicki said. "It is a perfect storm going on right now."

The Sandhills branch of the Food Bank serves about 122 agencies in Moore, Lee, Richmond and Scotland counties. The total population in the service area is 206,371. The number of customers seeking help from the Food Bank has grown from 31,000 in 2000 to 35,000 in 2006.

Those partner agencies

operate 74 food pantries, 21 group homes, 11 after-school programs, eight shelters and soup kitchens, six day care centers and two sheltered workshops. And the local agencies are feeling the strain.

"In general, they are reporting an increase in clients by 20 to 30 percent," Werbicki said. "My guess is those numbers will continue to increase."

Meeting that increasing demand had been difficult because perishable products make up about 60 percent of the food distributed through the local branch.

"Our donors have struggled this year," he said. "The drought has impacted them."

Another factor is that donations in the summer usually are below the levels of busier seasons, such as Christmas. But Werbicki says the need is greater now. The program serves nearly 12,000 children. Many of those have increased needs in the summer, because they no longer receive free or discounted meals from the schools.

According to Werbicki, 20,000 children are on free and reduced-price lunch in four counties, and many of them will need assistance from Food Bank agencies when school lets out in the next few weeks.

"Demand will get accentuated in the next few weeks," Werbicki said.

To help raise funds and supplies, the Sandhills branch of the Food Bank is partnering with First Fridays in Southern Pines for a Sandhills Kids Summer Stock event. Patrons of the First Fridays, which are held on the first Friday during the summer will begin in June. The events are held in downtown Southern Pines.

The goal of Kids Summer Stock is to replenish low supply levels through product or monetary donations and to increase awareness of the hunger risk to families in the Sandhills.

Most needed items include canned meals, such as stews, soups, tuna, ravioli, etc.; canned fruits and vegetables, rice, pasta, dried beans, cereals and peanut butter. Pop-top cans are preferred.

Other basic necessity items are paper products -- toilet paper, paper towels -- hygiene items and infant products, like

diapers, baby wipes, formula and cereal. Loose glass and plastic jars of baby food will be discarded due to health regulations.

For more information or to donate, visit the food bank online at sandhills.foodbankcenc.org.

Contact Tom Embrey at 693-2473 or by e-mail at tembrey@thepilot.com.

All contents © The Pilot LLC. Contents cannot be reproduced or used without express written consent of the publisher.