

Durham Food Bank Feeds Needy by the Ton

by Kadi Hodges

In the 34 counties served by the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, there are 400,000 people at risk of hunger. Nearly 30 percent of those are children. In the five-county Durham area alone there are 23,000 children who live below the poverty level. "There's a need in your community," said Food Bank spokeswoman Christy Simmons.

While more people remember to donate food around the holidays, the need for food aid doesn't start in November or end at Christmas. "The Food Bank delivers food daily and needs the support of the community year round," said Simmons.

The need for food donations grows all the time. Between 2002 and 2007, the amount of food the Durham branch distributed rose from 2.8 million pounds per year to 4.8 million pounds per year. The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina is now the eighth largest food bank in America.

Here's how the Food Bank works: when you donate food at most local food drives, like the one at the State Fair, the cans are packed on a truck and sent to the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. The organization has five branches, including the one on Gilbert Street in Durham. The Durham branch has an 18,500-square-foot warehouse where the food is sorted and shelved. In addition to donations from individuals, grocery stores and food manufacturers bring in truckloads of merchandise, especially products that are hard to sell or cosmetically damaged.

Between the stacks of cans and the freezers packed with eggs and vegetables, there are loads and loads of sweet potatoes (North Carolina grows about 40 percent of the nation's sweet potatoes, so it's an easy crop to come by). "If we had to have a trademark, it would probably be the sweet potato," joked Warehouse Coordinator Anthony Reyerros.

Partner agencies that include soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and church-based food pantries, come to the warehouse to shop. Shoppers load up industrial-sized portions of bread, sweet potatoes, pasta, and chicken. The food is rolled onto a scale and weighed. Frozen meats run about 18 cents per pound. So does coffee. Many foods are free.

As Reyerros explained, the agencies aren't paying per pound for the food. Rather, they're paying to keep the trucks moving and the lights on.

The partner agencies distribute the food to individuals in many ways -- from day care programs for the elderly to backpack programs that send food home with kids who receive all their meals free at school. Without the Food Bank it would be much more difficult for those agencies to keep food in stock. Food donations flow in unevenly,

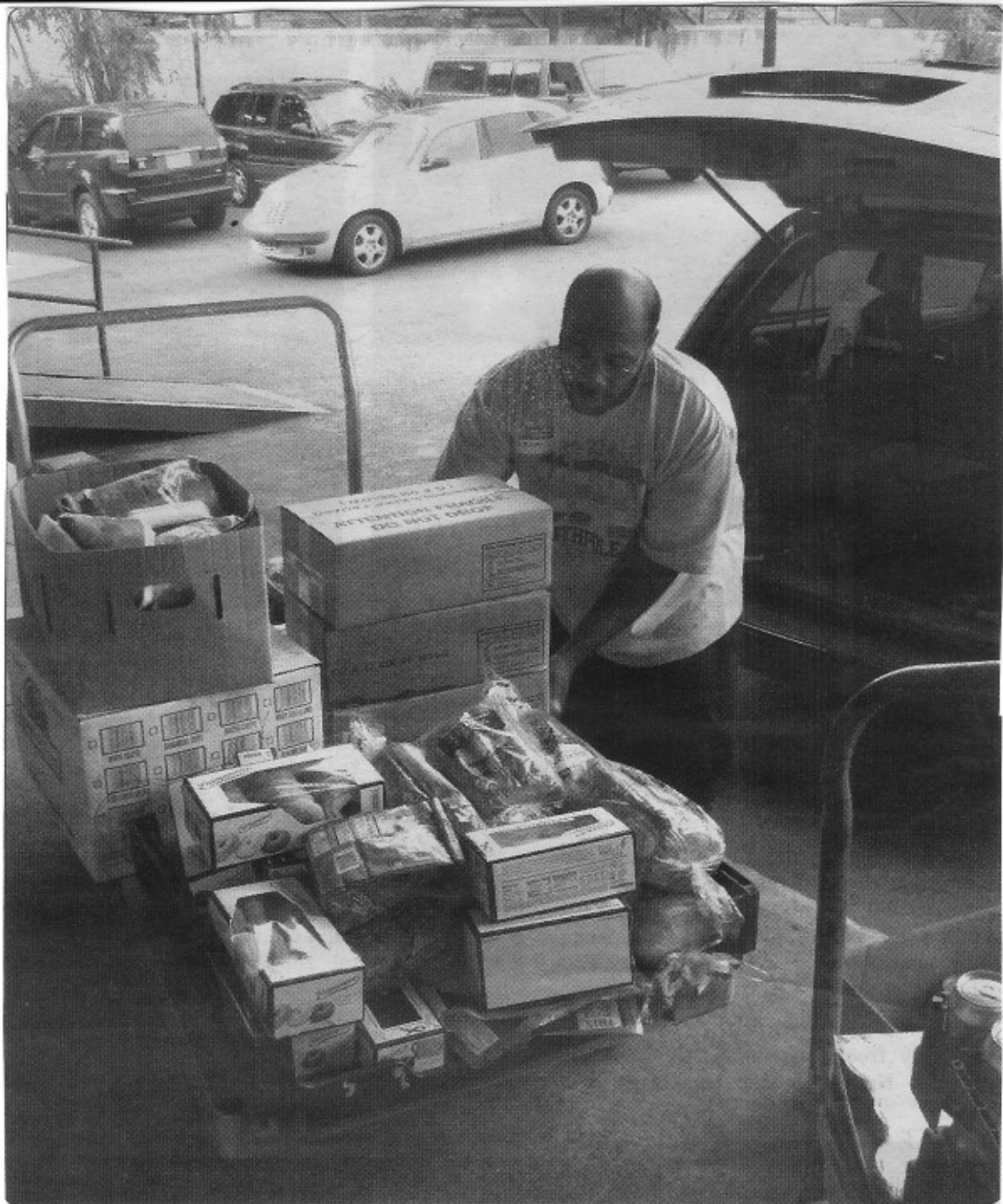
and without a central distribution center, local agencies would be in a never-ending food drive.

Between October and December, when charitable spirits are running high, the Food Bank receives 57 percent of the donations it will get for the year. But in the summer, donations dip and need rises because children aren't receiving free lunches at school. The inventory thins. This summer the amount of donated produce fell because of the drought.

When the food on the shelves isn't plentiful enough or nutritious enough, the Food Bank will buy food to make sure meals are available. But

to keep operating, the Food Bank relies on donations. Out of each dollar donated to the organization, 97 cents go directly to food programs. Chances are, those programs help someone in your neighborhood.

Want to donate food? Visit www.foodbank-cenc.org and find out how to hold a food drive, how to participate in upcoming events, and how to donate money toward food (every dollar donated will buy \$8 worth of food). To volunteer (jobs include warehouse repackaging, speaking, working in the kids cafe, and a monthly kids volunteering day), look online or call 956-2513.



At the Food Bank's Durham warehouse, volunteer Lejuan Gillespie loads food to be served at the Nehemiah Christian Center on Mangum Street. The Nehemiah Center feeds the homeless through a soup kitchen and bagged meals.