

Food Bank challenge: Getting surplus food to people who don't have enough

by Jennifer Bauman
Food Bank of Lincoln

Before I began working at the Food Bank of Lincoln, I had a mental picture of a little market where people could fill a few bags with canned vegetables and soup, maybe a loaf of bread or a frying chicken. This is a fairly common misconception.

In reality, the Food Bank is a big warehouse with rows of tall steel racking and a cooler and freezer both big enough to drive into. There are forklifts moving pallets of stacked boxes all around and five loading dock doors with vehicles — including three Food Bank trucks of various sizes — coming and going all day long.

The people who use the Food Bank are not the little families I had pictured. They are representatives



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The Food Bank functions as a co-op of these organizations, which include pantries, soup kitchens, residential programs, and community advocacy programs. For a small handling fee, agency representatives pick up food, cleaning supplies, and personal care products which they distribute at no charge to their clients in the form of meals or

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

of approximately 90 nonprofit member agencies that feed hungry people throughout southeastern Nebraska.

pantry boxes. The Food Bank is a busy place. On any given day you will see wiry little church ladies hefting mountains of boxes into waiting vehicles. Crews of volunteers stand at tables sorting donated food or repackaging bulk items. Warehouse workers shuttle agencies' orders to the docks, using forklifts and pallet jacks.

It's not unusual for an agency to collect more than 1,000 pounds of food in a single visit. This may sound like a lot, but these products will be distributed in a surprisingly short period. Vehicles pull away from the docks with their back bumpers riding low. We regularly test our spatial skills squeezing just one more box into a van that looks full.

The items distributed by the

Food Bank come from a variety of sources. Much of it is donated. If you've ever left a bag of food out for your letter carrier or put items in a barrel at holiday time, your food is part of this flow. Individuals and companies also donate money designated for food purchases.

Some manufacturers donate close-dated or slightly damaged products, occasionally by the truckload. Businesses and schools hold drives throughout the year. Other items are available to the Food Bank because of our affiliation with America's Second Harvest. Food Bank drivers also salvage excess food from local grocery stores and commercial kitchens. In turn, agencies distribute this food free of charge to people at soup kitchens, pantries, and other facilities throughout southeastern Nebraska.

These people come from a myriad of circumstances. Some need help because of life-changing situations such as death, job termination, or serious illness. Some people are homeless or near-homeless; some are unable to work due to physical or mental disabilities. Discrimination and language problems also keep many people from being



fully employed. And a growing number needing help are working folks whose incomes just don't cover household expenses.

Across the country, tons of food are being discarded every day rather than ending up on the tables of hungry people. At the same time, the number of households needing help continues to rise. The challenge is getting surplus food to people who don't have enough. The Food Bank of Lincoln and its member agencies are working toward this goal.

Watch future editions of *The Neighborhood Extra* for more about hunger-fighting activities in our community. The next "Food for Thought" column is scheduled to appear Sept. 29.

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