

Food Bank reports record distribution, but an even greater need

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There's been a lot of press lately about the state of food banks nationwide: warehouses are empty and pantry boxes are skimpy.

And yet most food banks report that they are distributing more food now than ever before.

Here in Lincoln the amount of food distributed by the Food Bank has increased every year in the organization's 25-year history – and 2007 will be a record year as we break the 3-million-pound mark for the first time.

That's 3 million pounds of food coming into the food bank and going back out into the community – roughly half a ton a day.

Thanks to hard work and generosity the food keeps arriving. And then it flies back out the door so fast it makes our heads spin.

Every pound gathered is pretty much spoken for even before it arrives in our warehouse. We sometimes wonder, were it not

for limitations such as staffing and space, how many pounds the Food Bank could redistribute.

Double? Triple? All we know for sure is that even with

steady growth, we are not meeting the needs of hungry families in Lincoln and surrounding communities.

So, what's going on in the food bank world?

How can the Lincoln Food Bank have a record year and still not have enough to help our hungry neighbors?

Well first, the need for food is up. Way up.

Layoffs and mortgage foreclosures have led to an increase in homelessness and poverty in general.

Prices keep climbing, debts

are high, wages are stagnant, and benefits are scarce. Because of this, pantries and soup kitchens are seeing a significant increase in the number of working poor people coming in. And unlike households in an emergency situation with an end in sight, these families return month after month because their financial solutions do not improve.

But while more people need help with food for longer periods of time, the supply of what's available to food banks is decreasing.

For one thing, potential donors – individuals, retailers, and manufacturers – are feeling some of the same pressures as families seeking assistance. And tough times lead to frugal behavior.

Many companies have begun to sell their surplus to discount outlets such as dollar stores rather than donating to charity. Inventory computerization means fewer overruns and mistakes. This is good news for manufacturers and retailers, but bad

news for food banks.

Surplus product coming to food banks is down due to the strong agricultural economy. Crops that once would have gone to the surplus food supply are being diverted for non-nutritional uses such as ethanol and high fructose corn syrup.

In 2004, \$233 million worth of surplus ag product went to commodities; two years later the amount was only \$67 million nationwide.

The Food Bank of Lincoln is fortunate to have relatively diverse sources of product; food banks relying more heavily on USDA supplies are among those hurting most right now.

This shrinking surplus has meant that food banks' supplies of nutritious items are gradually giving way to snacks and non-edibles. These income extenders are appreciated but they do not make up a meal.

The picture of a family leaving a food line with fixings for a complete meal was probably never accurate, but less so all the time.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

These days people are excited to see cans of green beans.

It's reported that the percentage of wealth going to the richest 1% of U.S. citizens is at its highest since 1928.

Yet poverty and homelessness are on the rise. The paradox of diminishing supplies and growing need in the midst of affluence is a mounting challenge for food banks.

What will happen, only time will tell, but the Food Bank will keep working to distribute as much food as possible.

And we can use all the help we can get—so be aware of your struggling neighbors and do what you can.

"Food For Thought" is contributed by the Food Bank of Lincoln and appears periodically in the Neighborhood Extra. The next column will be published March 29, 2008.