

OLDER ADULTS

Volunteers key to Food Bank service

by Jennifer Bauman/Food Bank of Lincoln

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Unless you were completely unmoved by the recent Inauguration and the “new era of responsibility” proposed by President Obama, you’ve probably been thinking about ways to contribute to the work of remaking America.

Well, if you’re interested in volunteering, our community is full of opportunities and the Food Bank of Lincoln is an excellent example.

Throughout its 25-year history the Food Bank has relied on volunteers to help feed hungry people in southeast Nebraska. Volunteers contribute to every aspect of the Food Bank’s operations.

Sorting food, stocking shelves, organizing food drives, repackaging bulk food, staffing mobile pantry operations, packing food bags, preparing mailings, picking up salvage food, helping with special events — none of these projects would be manageable by our small staff alone. But we also benefit from interacting with volunteers because of the skills, wisdom, and perspectives they bring to the Food Bank. They come to us from different walks of life and return to us for a variety of reasons and we’re all richer for it.

There are a number of regular volunteers who come to the Food Bank one or more days each week. Many are retirees who can work rings around younger people; a few of them have come faithfully for over a decade. They tell us their time at the Food Bank is very rewarding. We have come to rely on them.

In addition to these regulars, there is a rotating roster of volunteers who come once, twice, or many times. Some are high school students fulfilling hours for Community Involvement classes.

Others come to us through the Arbor Program — required volunteer hours for aid such as Food Stamps — and the county courts' Diversion Services.

Many volunteer simply to help people. They've already learned how rewarding volunteer work can be and those who begin at the Food Bank in programs like CI classes often return afterwards because they've learned the same lesson.

Students from Lincoln Public Schools' VOICE Program, a vocational work opportunity class, come every school day to volunteer for the LPS/Food Bank BackPack Program. These young adults assemble the 1,200 bags of food that are sent home with local elementary students on Fridays, deliver the bags to schools around town, and help with all kinds of chores at the Food Bank. The VOICE students bring a lot of energy and fun to our workplace.

Food drives provide tremendous volunteer opportunities. It takes thousands of volunteer hours from businesses all over town to bring together summer's Campaign against Hunger. Volunteer coordinators at each company energize their teams with friendly contests to see who can bring the most food and dollars to the Food Bank.

Another concentration of volunteer effort happens in May, when the Postal Drive enlists hundreds of volunteers working at postal substations, walking neighborhoods to collect bags of food, and making deliveries to the Food Bank.

Volunteerism is catching on with kids as an increasing number of schools hold food drives. This year Irving Middle School collected almost 6,000 pounds of food in their Tom Rutz Memorial Food Drive. This event was named in honor of a teacher who encouraged community service and now inspires students to give back.

And speaking of kids, more children are asking their friends to bring food instead of presents when they have birthday parties. It's wonderful to see young people coming to the Food Bank with bags and boxes of food, sometimes complete with party wrapping. Their enthusiasm gives us hope for the future. These kids are learning how good it feels to help others and will probably volunteer long past their own retirements.

There are so many ways to get involved in volunteer work in Lincoln. Scan the blue pages of your phone book for ideas. If you're already volunteering, consider getting a friend involved. We'd love to see you at the Food Bank.

Jennifer Bauman is agency relations director at the Food Bank of Lincoln. Learn more at www.lincolnfoodbank.org