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Comfort Food

Providing sustenance and care to Westchester's hungry residents.

By Christina Rohatynskij

The Food Bank for Westchester is one of eight food banks in New York State and a member of Feeding America, the national food bank network. As the county's only food bank, Food Bank for Westchester is the backbone of Westchester's emergency food supply. The Food Bank provides 95 percent of all the food distributed by local frontline hunger-relief programs throughout Westchester, including soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters and residential programs. The food is served to hungry people as cooked meals or provided as groceries to take home.

The Food Bank estimates that 200,000 people in Westchester County are hungry or at risk of hunger. Nearly half of them are seniors over age 55 and approximately one-third are children under age 18. The poor economy and rising fuel and food prices have caused the demand for food assistance to skyrocket in recent years. As the need for emergency food has grown, the Food Bank has had to find a larger warehouse to acquire and distribute increasing food. The plan is to relocate from Millwood to Elmsford by the year's end.

The Food Bank acquires food through donations, purchase and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Whenever possible, meals are acquired from local sources. Food received in bulk quantities is repacked by volunteers who come daily to the Food Bank warehouse. Often these volunteers are staff from local corporations that help out for the day.

Creative and forward thinking, the Food Bank is committed to providing "nutrition not just calories" to make a positive impact on the fragile health of hungry people, especially children and seniors. It acquires and distributes the least-processed, shelf-stable foods available that are also free of sugar and low in sodium. It also collects frozen meat, poultry and fish and as much fresh produce as possible.

The Food Bank for Westchester has developed two successful programs for providing hungry Westchester residents increased access to fresh foods: Green Thumb and Rapid Distribution.

Through the Green Thumb program, the Food Bank acquires four to five types of vegetables and two to three types of fruits from local sources every week, year-round. The produce arrives at the Food Bank warehouse and is repacked by volunteers into 1,900 bags of combined fruits and vegetables that work well in meal preparation. The produce bags are distributed with a recipe flyer in English and Spanish that offers ways to prepare and combine the produce for maximum nutritional benefit.

The Rapid Distribution program takes advantage of the two truckloads per month, totaling 80,000 pounds, of fresh produce available to Feeding America affiliates. Over a period of three days, it distributes the produce to six separate sites around Westchester. Participating agencies give out vouchers for people to cash in to get the produce. Last year, more than 1 million pounds of food were distributed to 131,701 people.

The Food Bank also offers direct services. The Backpack initiative provides food to food-insecure children on weekends. The program has expanded to 33 sites, granting nearly 26,000 well-stocked backpacks to 736 children. Kids Cafe serves snacks and hot meals, as well as brings child-friendly nutrition education activities to children in afterschool and other childcare programs. SNAP (food stamp) application assistance and the STEPS program are additional direct services. In 2010, 353 people were helped with SNAP applications via home visits. The STEPS program teaches women with children to take steps toward independence.

The Food Bank for Westchester provides food to 227 agencies and programs, the majority of which are food pantries and soup kitchens. It delivers food daily to most member programs, while some programs pick up food from the Food Bank warehouse. Last year, the Food Bank made nearly 6,000 deliveries around the county, provided food for 668 pickups and distributed more than 7 million pounds of food total, which was 1 million pounds more than in 2009.

The Food Bank also provides food-safety training to member programs and on-demand nutrition classes, in addition to cost-effective and efficient ways to reduce hunger. However, this is not a permanent solution to hunger and poverty. Until federal policies and programs are developed to help people in times of need, food banking is the best bandage around.

To learn more about the Food Bank for Westchester programs and how you can help, visit www.foodbankforwestchester.org or call (914)923-1100.

Christina Rohatynskij has been executive director of the Food Bank for Westchester since 1993.





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