

# Doling out hope one food box at a time

By ERIC A. HOWALD  
*Of the Keizertimes*

I'm helping my third client of the Keizer Community Food Bank (KCFB) collect items for a food box when I notice that we've run out of laundry detergent.

It's not an absolute necessity, but it's not the only thing that's disappeared. There wasn't much bar soap to begin with, ranch dressing is dwindling and the quarts of 1 percent milk left can be counted on one hand.

My third client of the night means we've helped about a dozen of the 20 families waiting for food boxes. There's plenty of bread and even fresh fruit and vegetables still available, but it's the extra items that can add a lot to a grocery bill I wish the food bank had in greater supply.

It's Monday, Aug. 14, and it is not the first time I've "muled" for KCFB. "Mules" are the food bank lingo for the volunteers that help clients collect items for their food boxes and then assist them with loading into their vehicles. I sincerely doubt it will be my last time.

Tonight the members of the Keizer City Council and City Recorder Tracy Davis visited

for a tour of the facility. Davis, Councilor Roland Herrera and Mayor Cathy Clark stayed for volunteer shifts. No one asked me to stay, but I've seen the work that this food bank does, talked with volunteers and directors past and present, volunteered alongside them, and come to realize that what happens here is less about food and more about hope.

Even so, it's been a time of change for the food bank and for clients, says Rev. Curt McCormack, the director of KCFB, a interfaith collaboration of five Keizer churches.

"Right now our numbers are down over last year, we used to see about 220 families a month and now it's about 175. The difference is we are seeing more new clients each month," he says.

He's uncertain how to interpret the data. It could mean that some families are finding jobs easier to come by, but it seems that others (maybe those in other industries) are finding themselves in need for the first time.

On the other hand, there is a healthy amount of food on the pantry shelves. In the past, I've seen it as bare as a few cans and boxes per shelf. There are,



of course, needs. Canned fruit or pre-packaged cups of fruit or applesauce are always hard to come by here. Those items are often more expensive per ounce than canned vegetables or proteins.

KCFB gets about 80 percent of the food it provides to families from the Marion-Polk Food Share, another 5 percent is donated directly to the food bank, which is housed at Faith Lutheran Church on River Road North. The remainder is purchased with financial donations, and McCormack can purchase about \$3 worth of food and other items for every \$1 in donations. Recently, it's become more important to have the financial donations to



KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald  
ABOVE: Margi Harp and Kristina DeWitt pack food boxes in the Keizer Community Food Bank pantry. RIGHT: Sherry Lowells and Dr. Marie Peck fold T-shirts donated by the Salem Bicycle Club.

purchase specific items when the food bank runs low.

"There are times when we have more rice than we can give away, but it's a low rice



time right now," McCormack says.

The food bank also deals with an unpredictable schedule in terms of orders from the Marion-Polk Food Share, which are completed two weeks before a truck delivers it, and needs of clients that change from week-to-week.

McCormack could take advantage of a local cannery that will sell canned food cheap in bulk, but he would have to buy it by the pallet and then figure out how to transport it to Faith Lutheran and store it until it is all given away.

"That's why dollar donations work better. We can buy what we need when we need it and the dollar goes a lot further," McCormack says.

I don't feel like it's a stretch to say that those dollars buy hope. Food on the table or less stress around it means families

can have one more day when life in general is less of a struggle.

Visiting a food bank for the first time is likely a pride-shattering choice for anyone, but what has always impressed me is the collective character of the volunteers who welcome them into the fold without judgement or pity and do their best to send them on their way able to hold their heads a little higher than when they came in.

As a volunteer, being around others so willing to see the best in every person feels like redemption for some of the other horrors the world foists upon us. That's what keeps me coming back. I suspect the experience is the same for others,

and it's a huge return on a \$1 investment.

For more information on donating to KCFB, call 503-871-9100. Sustainable giving options are available.

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