

Food Security is Top Priority

High joblessness puts strain on local services

Oregon's unemployment rate has remained at roughly 10.5 percent — a percentage point above the national average — for the last year, and shows no sign of improving.

The state Employment Department reported Tuesday that 209,601 Oregonians were unemployed in November. With that many Oregonians out of work, food security has become a top priority statewide.

The latest USDA hunger report shows that about 13.9 percent of households — more than 500,000 Oregonians — suffer from food insecurity, and another 225,000 experience very low security, meaning they are forced to cut or skip meals on a regular basis because they cannot afford food.

Enter the Oregon Food Bank, a nonprofit charitable organization that acts as a hub connecting a network of 20 regional food banks, agencies, and programs, to distribute emergency food to approximately 240,000 hungry people each month in Oregon and southwest Washington.

The OFB has been operating out of its 108,000-square-foot northeast



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Volunteers Camille Kyle (from left) Ron Emig and Antonia Maurer sort through boxes of donated foods at the Oregon Food Bank in northeast Portland.

Portland building and warehouse any time, and moves 38 million pounds of food each year in just that one facility.

Jean Kempe-Ware, public relations manager for the nonprofit, says that OFB operates different from any other food bank in the nation.

"Here in Oregon, we have a wonderful, equitable, collaborative network to pull resources together," she said. "If one regional food bank

has a ton of onions, we can pick them up and distribute them. Someone in Coos Bay will have a similar mix of product as someone in Ontario or Portland due the sharing throughout the network."

Kempe-Ware stresses the importance of volunteers, workers, businesses and individuals who donate time, money, and goods to the food bank, especially in this economy.

"I mean this is a horrendous number of emergency food boxes distributed through the OFB network — 917,000 from July 2009 to June 2010," she said. "We're extremely thankful to our community for the support."

The network includes 20 regional food banks — four that are operated by the OFB and 16 independent nonprofit organizations — and 947 local partner agencies, including pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, low-income senior and day care centers, and other programs. All together, 72 million pounds of food is distributed through this network each year, with the total value of \$41,012,314 in the last fiscal year.

"Our warehouse operates day and night — during the day we're receiving food donations and agencies are picking up food. At night, we're loading semis and preparing food for agencies to pick up," said Kempe-Ware.

The OFB network receives 55 percent of its food from food industry donations — from stores like

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Dr. Billy R. Flowers (above center) and his skilled staff are ready to help those in need.

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Grocers Support 'Fresh Alliance'

The Oregon Food Bank handles much more than individual donations from food drives. Since 2002, the organization has been operating Fresh Alliance, a program which collects perishable food from grocery markets.

Every grocery store has products with a "use-by" date, required by the health code. When the dates expire, the products are usually pulled from shelves and thrown away, but some items like meat and dairy products can still be safe to eat, as the date is a precaution.

"We wouldn't want to give the Food Bank food we wouldn't eat ourselves," said Melinda Merrill, spokesperson for Fred Meyer stores.

The Oregon Food Bank collects the products — making sure everything stays refrigerated or frozen — and sends them out the same day to its network, which includes soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, and other community service programs.

QFC and Whole Foods stores partnered with the program ini-

tially, and Albertsons and Fred Meyer joined the next year. By 2004, the Food Bank was receiving 985,772 pounds of food from 28 stores.

Since then, the Fresh Alliance program has expanded to collecting 7 million pounds of donations or 3,500 tons of food that would have otherwise been thrown away.

On comparison, a new food recycling center approved this month by the Metro council will be capable of processing about 90,000 tons of solid food waste and 104,000 tons of liquid food waste from per year.

There is still too much being discarded in the overall production and storage of food, but the Oregon Food Bank network is doing its part to reduce unnecessary waste.

Since joining the Food Bank program, Merrill said, Fred Meyer employee morale has improved. "They knew they were throwing away perfectly good food. Now, they not only feel good for the donation part, but by reducing landfill waste too."