

FROM FAITH TO FOOD

'Blue bag Sunday' donations from Seaside church have huge impact for food bank

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

For the past four years, the South Clatsop County Food Bank had always counted on the North Coast Family Fellowship as a steady source for donations. But at the beginning of this year, regional manager Karla Gann started to see more and more blue bags filled to the brim with food donations. Instead of receiving 500 to 800 pounds of food from the church like she expected, she started getting monthly donations of 800 to 1,400 pounds.

It's called blue bag Sunday. The first Sunday of the month, the congregation of the North Coast Family Fellowship piles fruits, vegetables, canned goods and more into blue bags that read "With Love" on the side, and leave them in the church for the food bank to pick up Monday. This church alone makes up one-tenth of all donations to the food bank.

It's a type of donation Gann rarely sees from a private entity, and she said the impacts are huge.

"We can go from distributing 65 pounds of food to a family at one time to 125 pounds. Before we were able to give out about on average three days worth of food to a recipient," Gann said. "Because of this increase, now I can give out closer to five days worth of food at a time. This helps get people through."

In Clatsop County, that means helping the 390 to 470 families who come in each month needing food to get by before payday.

"It keeps the money flowing. We are saving \$700 to \$1,000 a month to keep the lights and to build a reserve instead of spending it on building up our food supply," she said. "Everyone here is a volunteer. So it's significant."

'With Love'

When John Neagle joined the North Coast Family Fellowship last October, the pastor liked how the ministry had connected with the community through donations to the



South Clatsop County Food Bank regional manager Karla Gann stands next to stacks of donations recently made by a local church. Gann said the amount of donated goods has increased dramatically since the beginning of the year.

COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

food bank. So starting in January, he challenged his congregation to do more.

Tyler Evans, a volunteer with the church, said the office started greeting people at the door with blue bags inscribed with the words "With Love."

"It's easier to donate when you have a reminder," Evans said.

Neagle said he made expanding the relationship with the food bank, which the church has had since

2012, a priority because it is an easy, yet impactful, way to connect with the community.

"When people offer, sometimes it's just a few items, and other times they bring two bags packed to the gills that takes two hands to carry," Neagle said. "Sharing helps the person you are sharing with, but it's also helpful for those who are giving the food. We're not just trying to give you a can of food; we're trying to share God's love through that can of food."

Children's ministries director Annie Utterback said helping to feed the community is an important way as Christians to be a helping hand for all.

"This is a way for us to reach out without people having to walk through our door," she said.

The fellowship plans to keep expanding its contribution to the food bank, as well as local shelters and other social services, Neagle said.

"It's about blessing people where

they are at, and showing them love through food," worship arts and student ministries director Sam Hughes said.

Meeting a need

An estimated 25 percent of county residents qualify for emergency food assistance, Clatsop County Regional Food Bank Director Marlin Martin said, a figure that has remained steady for the past five years. More than 6,850 people used emergency food resources last year.

"We have continued for the past 11 years to see increases in the number of emergency food boxes being distributed and the number of people visiting food banks, even though the population hasn't grown significantly," Martin said. "Those people living in poverty have fallen into deeper crevasses of poverty. We count each household as individual visits, and we see the same households coming more often."

Clatsop County isn't alone. The Oregon Center for Public Policy reported last year that 1 in 6 families statewide lack consistent access to adequate food. Oregon has also seen the largest increase in food insecurity, spiking 18.4 percent since the Great Recession. "We don't have enough living wage jobs for people to meet their food needs," Martin said.

To meet this steadily increasing need, Martin said the regional food bank is working on securing more funds to implement a mobile soup kitchen later this fall — much like the mobile produce bank that has provided fresh vegetables and fruits for the past three years.

It's not a problem Gann sees going away anytime soon. But if she can keep handing out five days worth of food instead of three, she sees it as one more way to help people just make it through.

"I have a passion for food, and a passion for people," she said. "We want to provide as much variety and choice as we can for people who visit us, and donations like this keeps us from falling into just rice and beans."

'Social investment' ready to gamble on preschool

Schools, investors could see returns

By R.J. Marx
Cannon Beach Gazette

A new program could bring private sector funding for preschool education in Clatsop County.

County Manager Cameron Moore and Sydney Van Dusen, coordinator of Way to Wellville, came to Seaside's Downtown Development Association meeting Aug. 10 with plans for supplementing public funds with private investment to help provide preschool for children who otherwise could not afford it.

Clatsop County is one of five communities around the country to participate in the Way to Wellville program, which came to the county in 2014.

Moore, who serves on



County Manager Cameron Moore

the group's economic development committee, said the team considered lack of preschool in the county a significant impediment to economic development.

"If you have children but you don't have a place for those children to go while you go to work, you may not be working," Moore said.

Employers want to know their employees' families are taken care of, so having high-quality preschool in the county has economic impacts, Moore said.

Long-term return

In December, the county was approved for \$350,000 in federal grant money from the U.S. Department of Education, he said, money which did not require local matching funds.

"Since then we've been doing a lot of work to see if we could in some way provide additional preschool opportunities for 600 children in our county," Moore said.

That number captures some, if not all, of the children who don't have access to those services, Moore said.

One option is to "pay for success," he said, through a social investment concept. "How do you get the private sector to pay for things the public sector typically pays for?" Moore asked. "There are private investors willing to invest in these types of investments. Why not tap into that?"

Programs in other counties have addressed issues like homelessness and veterans'

services, Moore said. The initial money is private, but the private investor is paid through public dollars.

Moore said the funding could reduce the number of children who need special education when they get to the K-12 system, or prepare young children so they are better academically. Returns come over the long term.

"We go to the private sector and say, 'Would you pay for this?' If they say 'yes,' and they invest, they make some money — typically 5 percent," Moore said. "If we don't achieve the outcome — they lose their money. If they put up the money and we achieve these outcomes, we get what we want and you get a return on investment."

Families benefit

Children could receive free universal preschool if they qualify, Van Dusen added. "It would be for those families

who cannot afford preschool at this time," she said.

Families at 300 percent of poverty level would be available to participate in the preschool program. Since income of \$24,000 for a family of four is considered poverty level, a family with an income of up to \$70,000 could be eligible, Van Dusen said.

Funds would "bring everybody up to a higher standard," Moore said, working with existing local preschools to provide greater access for county children, kindergarten readiness and teacher training, among other goals.

Preschool teachers in the county make about one half what kindergarten teachers earn, he said. "That doesn't seem right to us."

If the program is successful, the cost of individualized instruction programs for struggling students — which can reach \$20,000 per year, per child — can be significantly

reduced, Van Dusen said. "If you think of that over 12 years, that adds up."

If expenses can be reduced to \$10,000 per child, she said, school districts could see savings of \$120,000.

Savings could be used to cover investment costs and return. Additional savings stay with the school district, she added.

The nonprofit Social Finance, from Boston, Massachusetts, is visiting the county to discuss options, Van Dusen said.

Next steps involve meetings between investors and the community for data gathering and assessments.

The committee is in the informational phase to determine if this model or another model will work for the county in terms of enhancing preschool opportunities.

A feasibility study is expected in six to nine months, Moore said.

Clatsop County schools look to combat absenteeism

By Edward Stratton
EO Media Group

As students return to school, educators are searching for ways to combat absenteeism — a nagging issue that hampers learning and consistently places Oregon near the bottom nationally.

On average, more than one-fifth of students in Clatsop County were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year, according to the most recent data from the state Department of Education.

Students are counted as chronically absent if they miss at least 10 percent of school days, out of 180 days in a given year. More than 100,000 students in Oregon fit the definition in the 2015-16



Students roam the halls of Astoria High School looking for the first classroom of the day.

school year, including more than 1,000 in Clatsop County.

In the 2015-16 school year, 17.6 percent of students in the Astoria School District were chronically absent, along with 18.5 percent in Warrenton-Hammond, 26.7 percent in Seaside, 22.3 percent in Knapapa and 24.5 percent in Jewell.

Across the board, chronic

absenteeism started higher in preschool and kindergarten, lowered toward middle school as students became more independent of parents, and grew again in high school.

Research shows that missing school can lead to decreased academic performance, future attendance issues, increased disciplinary problems and a dramatically lower chance of graduating high school.

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that 87 percent of freshmen in high school who missed four or fewer days of school per semester graduated. That rate dipped to 63 percent for students who missed between five and nine days, and 41 percent for those who missed 10 to 14 days.

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