

## A New Year's Resolution to Serve

*by Maureen McGarry*



Emergency food is more than something we store for a power-out or an earthquake. For some, it is a matter of whether you have enough food for your children to eat tomorrow. Food insecurity is a real issue and the need for nutrition assistance is high in many of our communities. Although Food for People has a large

facility and does a wide distribution in Eureka, there are several satellite locations (known as food pantry shelves) where volunteers are in high demand to help out.

“The Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) is not a month of food. It is a box once a month that may last for 2 or 3 days for a family of 4,” says Katy Garrison, director of the St. Joseph’s Pantry Shelf for 3 years. “There are approximately 15 to 20 items in each box.” With the help of many volunteers, approximately 350 families (1100 people a month) are served with these monthly boxes in Fortuna and surrounding areas.

Food pantries do more than give food; they also help link people to other services. As a retired RN, Garrison knows the importance of connecting people to the various human services that are available. She sees recipients three times a week while she does intake at the center. Many people who receive food are also referred to programs like CalFresh, and the mobile unit for the Department for Health and Human Services.

Located on Newburg Avenue in the center of Fortuna, St Joseph’s Food Pantry Shelf originally started in the 1980’s as outreach by the Catholic parish led by Father

Thomas Devereaux. He was approached by volunteers in the parish who wanted to provide extra assistance to local seniors in Fortuna. The first food donations came from the Fernbridge Creamery. Cheese, butter, and milk were the first items to be distributed. Gradually, parishioners donated more food and went to discount stores and purchased bulk canned goods.

“It was a project that just kept growing,” reports Garrison. “A system was set up for clients to come once a month for food boxes. However, it is not just the parish that we serve. It’s the entire community.”

St. Joseph’s Food Pantry linked up with Food for People over a decade ago and as a result, more food, and a wider selection, is available for distribution with more consistency. Contributions of food also come from food drives by clubs at Fortuna High School, the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Presbyterian Church, the local Kiwanis, and Ray’s Food Place. Safeway contributes food to the program year round. Steve Palecki and the Community Garden Project (located next to the Food Pantry Shelf) also donate fresh fruit and vegetables

“For a period of time, people came from Ferndale, Garberville, Redway, Rio Dell and Bridgeville. Now there are food pantries in several of those communities,” says Garrison. “The vast majority of people we serve are white females between the ages of 20 and 35 with little or no education beyond high school, maybe a low-income job, and one or more children.” Most often, she reports, fathers are not involved.

Garrison says they would like to serve more seniors and assumes there are more who qualify for food boxes. Currently, only 10% of those served are seniors. She would also love to have more senior volunteers.

Orval, Garrison’s husband fills in as a volunteer frequently. “We need more volunteers who can be responsible and reliable. It’s a great job for a retired person.”

Consider a New Year’s resolution to help out at a food pantry in your community. For more information about St. Joseph’s Food Pantry Shelf, contact Katy Garrison at 725-1148.