

BILL LITTLEWOOD: Keep the food bank in your holiday plans

By **Bill Littlewood**

11/11/06 03:53:18

As the holidays fast approach, many people are starting to plan their menus for festive family gatherings and plentiful holiday dinners. But many families in the Valley are planning for something much different. They are struggling just to feed their family tonight's dinner. The fact of the matter is hunger is not something that just happens around the holidays, it is an unfortunate phenomenon that happens all year round.

Earlier this year, Fresno was ranked first in the nation for poverty clusters, according to a report done by the Brookings Institute. Yet little has been done to improve conditions or help those living in poverty; the very people experiencing hunger. There are plenty of meetings on how we resolve the problem of poverty and hunger but no real action. And funding sources to help feed people are becoming slim.

The Community Food Bank and its partnering agencies are working diligently to make sure all individuals have the opportunity to provide for their families every day of the year. The food bank's 180 partner agencies distribute food to more than 46,000 people in any given week. Now, with the rising cost of housing, electricity and gas, many families are depending on the food bank and the many food pantries to help put food on their tables.

I am the incoming Board Chair of Community Food Bank's Board of Directors. We are embarking on a new chapter in the food bank's history and are becoming better advocates for hunger issues that plague the Valley. The food bank has initiated new programs that are feeding more people. In August, the food bank began Free Food Fridays, where those in need could receive a box of food.

The response was great! More than 1,000 people showed up, and the food bank distributed more than 74,000 pounds of food to those in need. As much as this program was a success, it also proved that there is still a great number of people who are in desperate need of food. It also affirmed that the problem of hunger is not going away anytime soon.

It is critical that community members of this city get involved in the fight to end hunger in the Valley. We are one of the richest areas in the world for agriculture, yet we let thousands of families, children and seniors go without the basics they need to allow them to eat on a daily basis. We, as a community, have to step up.

Relying on support

Every day of the year, the food bank relies on the generous support of the public. Whether they are donating their time to sort and distribute food or donating what they can from their checkbooks to help feed those in need, there are many different ways people can get involved. They can donate their time by distributing food to those in need at such gatherings as Free Food Fridays.

They can sponsor a food drive with their company, school or service organization group. Food drives allow us to fill our shelves with much-needed shelf-stable foods such as canned meats, rice, beans and dry milk. These are products that are not normally donated by large corporations.

The food bank can also turn every \$1 from a donor into \$8 of food, so every dollar donated can

go a long way to help needy families and individuals. Support like this from the community is truly needed throughout the whole year, not just during the holidays when donations and volunteers are at their highest.

The food bank is also becoming a strong advocate for changes in hunger polices. We are letting our state, local and federal elected officials know about what we are doing to end hunger. We have called upon them countless times to help and meet those people who are lined up for food so they can see it is not just the homeless who need help.

It is the mother who called in sick to work to stand in line at Free Food Fridays because she had no food to feed her family until her next pay check. This story is just one of the examples of the many working poor who are struggling to make ends meet.

These are the people our elected officials need to see and meet — the real faces of hunger! The food bank is currently running its programs without any help from local government. Budget cuts and funding restrictions have made it even more difficult to receive monies to feed people.

The food bank is going to continue its fight against hunger. But we cannot do it alone. Anything you can do to help in the fight against hunger will make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate

So the next time you sit down to your holiday meal, or any meal for that matter, be thankful for what you have and remember those who are going without!

Bill Littlewood is board president of Community Food Bank.

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