

Turkey donations scant before holiday

Charitable groups fear the poor will go hungry.

By **Pablo Lopez / The Fresno Bee**

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The walk-in freezer at the Fresno Rescue Mission on Wednesday had just 10 turkeys — a bad omen for the homeless, considering Thanksgiving is next week.

"We usually have hundreds of turkeys by now," said the Rev. Larry Arce, the mission's chief executive officer.

Across the Valley, churches and organizations that serve the needy are worrying this year about Thanksgiving. Donations are down, some say, because of the economy and the summer's heat wave, which killed nearly a million chickens and turkeys.

Bread of Life ministry, for example, is still waiting for its first donation of turkeys. The ministry feeds the needy every Wednesday at Roeding Park in Fresno and has a Thanksgiving feast for them every year.

Traditionally, donations increase in November and December, said Jim Connell, executive director of the Poverello House, an agency that feeds and helps the homeless and other poor people.

This year, donations are just trickling in, he said.

Not all the news is bad. Fresno Council Member Cynthia Sterling hopes to donate about 4,000 turkeys to the poor. A year ago, Sterling said she gave away 3,200 turkeys to more than 100 schools, churches and organizations.

"One thing I know how to do is feed the poor," Sterling said. But she is still raising money to reach her goal by Friday, when the turkeys will be given out.

Charlie Wolff, director of fund development for Visalia Emergency Aid, said he's worried because the charity had about 300 turkeys donated by individuals and service clubs at this time last year.

Wednesday, the group's freezer had only five birds, he said.

Emergency Aid has gotten 700 requests for turkeys, normally passed out at its annual Thanksgiving eve food distribution, and still expects to get 300 to 400 more applications.

"We're in desperate need this year," Wolff said.

Patricia Rivera, who with her husband, Phil, founded Bread of Life 17 years ago, said this year's lack of donations may reflect economic worries of people who have given in the past.

"Maybe people have given so much that they have to hang on to what they have in case

MORE INFORMATION

To help

Some Valley outlets soliciting food or donations:

Bread of Life, (559) 241-0271.

Community Food Bank, Fresno, (559) 237-3663.

Fresno City Council Member Cynthia Sterling, (559) 621-8000.

Fresno Rescue Mission, (559) 268-0839.

Heart of the Valley Church, Visalia, (559) 625-1737.

Madera Rescue Mission, (559) 675-8321.

Poverello House, (559) 498-6988.

Visalia Emergency Aid, (559) 732-0101.

something happens to them," she said.

Because competition for dwindling donations is fierce, some people are on edge.

Jacob Velasco, assistant chaplain of the Madera Rescue Mission, said the shelter has been serving the needy for 21 years. But now another agency has set up shop in the same neighborhood, doing the same type of outreach.

Both agencies have put out the word that they need donations for their Thanksgiving feast this Saturday afternoon.

"Why did they have to do this on the same day? It takes away from what we are trying to do," Velasco said.

Sarah Reyes, executive director of the Community Food Bank, said her agency is feeling the pinch. The food bank uses donations to buy thousands of discounted turkeys each year, in addition to the birds donated by the public. The agency then distributes the turkeys, along with other food, to shelters, soup kitchens, day cares and other agencies in Fresno, Madera and Kings counties.

Reyes said last summer's heat wave not only killed turkeys, but also made them less likely to reproduce. Because supply dropped, the price of the bird increased, affecting the typical donor to the food bank.

According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, the typical price of a 16-pound turkey this year is \$15.70, or roughly 98 cents per pound, an increase of 4 cents per pound from last year.

In the past, donors took advantage of supermarket promotions to buy one turkey and get one free. The free turkeys were donated to the food bank. This year, that type of donation isn't happening, Reyes said, likely because people are paying higher prices for gasoline, rent, utility bills and food.

"The economy may be getting better for the rich, but the middle class and working poor are barely making it," she said.

Hunger, however, shouldn't be an issue in the agricultural heartland, said Edie Jessup, coordinator for Fresno Metro Ministry's Hunger and Nutrition Project.

"We have an abundance of food, but it's not getting to the people who need it," said Jessup, who cited statistics that showed more than 5 million Californians are hungry or live in fear of hunger.

About 175,440 people, or one in five people, living in Fresno County live in poverty, according to California Food Policy Advocates, a public policy organization. About 78,520 of them are children.

Though donations help, Jessup said the best defense against hunger is making sure eligible residents are enrolled in a federal food program such as food stamps and school meals.

"It's great that people are thoughtful and thankful at Thanksgiving," Jessup said. "But we also have to think about the next day, too."

Bee staff writer Lewis Griswold contributed to this report. The reporter can be reached atplopez@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6434.

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