

Food for Thought

The Foodbank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties helps fill the Jersey Shore's unseen need.

by Jill M. Ocone



Rosetta Key, Townsquare Media

The Foodbank's mission is to alleviate hunger and build food security in Monmouth and Ocean Counties.

Imagine for a minute, you are unexpectedly laid off from your job, a position you have held for over fifteen years. You have three children and a spouse, a total of five mouths to feed. Your spouse works a full time job, but that paycheck alone is not enough to pay the monthly bills, let alone pay for groceries and everyday staples. You never thought this could happen to you, not knowing where to turn for help with putting food on the table. Realistically, those who have sought help from the Foodbank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties never thought it could happen to them either. Unfortunately, the reality is that it *can* happen to you. And if it does, the Foodbank will be there to help you, no matter what time of year.

2014 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Foodbank, whose mission is to alleviate hunger and build food security in Monmouth and Ocean Counties. What three friends started in 1984, when they were able to help twenty-five charities and serve 10,000 pounds of food, has grown into a successful non-profit organization, helping 270 charities/agencies and serving over eight million pounds of food annually.

A common misconception is that hunger is not a problem here at the Jersey Shore. However, when over 127,000 people a year (one in ten

people in the two counties) receive food through the charities supported by the Foodbank, it is clear that the need is, indeed, right here.

“People would be surprised about the amount of need,” said Marion Lynch, Media Director of the Foodbank. “These are relatively affluent counties, but 51,000 children were helped last year. That is one in six children living in Monmouth and Ocean Counties,” Lynch added.

Lynch estimates that the Foodbank will distribute nine million pounds or more of food in 2014, which is an unprecedented increase. One reason

for the increase is higher demand due to Superstorm Sandy. Countless shore families were not stronger than the storm, and due to the circumstances of lost housing and/or employment, the Foodbank still assists Sandy victims and charities on a daily basis, more than a year-and-a-half after Sandy ravaged New Jersey.

Demand also increased as a result of massive cuts to the federal food stamps program last year, and another food stamp cut may be looming. It is anticipated that if Congress passes a bill known as the “Farm Bill” in

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2014, \$800 million will be cut annually from the food stamp program, according to a January 29, 2014 article on *Time Magazine's* website. Lynch explained that the network of Foodbanks and feeding programs across the nation would not be able to sustain the anticipated impact of those losing food stamp benefits.

For Lynch, the grim reality of the need in Monmouth and Ocean counties became crystal clear when she saw volunteers turn into the needy as a result of the 2008 economic col-

lapse. "It made me realize how close hunger is. It is not others. It is all of us. And it could be any of us if we lose our jobs, have an unexpected illness, or survive a storm like Sandy," Lynch said.

Carlos Rodriguez is a recognized voice in anti-hunger and poverty and joined the Foodbank as Executive Director in 2012. He said that in addition to the economy, food stamp cuts, and Superstorm Sandy, 2014 has already brought an additional increase in need as a direct result of

the extreme winter weather, including two polar vortexes at the Jersey Shore. "The need is now, more than ever. It's your neighbor, and if a family had a hard time around the holidays, they will definitely have a problem putting food on the table year-round," he said.

Many donors are very generous around the holiday season, but both Lynch and Rodriguez stated that while the holidays come and go, the need is there all year long. The demand for food assistance actually rises in the summer, known as the "Season of Hunger." Food and monetary donations tend to slow down as the weather gets warmer, and as schools let out for the summer, children who might get breakfast or lunch at school do not receive those meals.

According to Lynch, the most needed items are proteins such as canned fish, chicken or meat, and peanut butter as well as shelf-stable milk products. With a staff nutritionist on site, a goal for 2014 is to increase the amount of healthier food donations. "The face of hunger is obesity. Cheap calories are not healthy calories," Lynch said.

Rodriguez added, "We hope to increase the quality of the food we distribute. Our goal this year is to distribute over one and a half million pounds of fresh produce. I'm hopeful that more than that will be distributed this year."

The Foodbank's inventory of provisions comes from a variety of sources, including local supermarkets, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and individual donations. "We do purchase fifteen percent of the food in our inventory, but we save money when purchasing because we buy in bulk," said Lynch. All donations and goods are sorted by volunteers, who are trained to check the safety and dates of products. From there, the food is packaged into family boxes, limited cooking facility boxes, and pantry boxes, and the boxes are then distributed to those in need.

Foodbank Events

Highlighted below are a few of the Foodbank's events held throughout the year. Supporting these events is another way one can help the charity's mission.

Cooking With Marilyn

Restaurateur Marilyn Schlossbach's third annual "Cooking with Marilyn" series of cooking demonstrations will be held at Langosta Lounge in Asbury Park. Two events are scheduled for this spring. The **March 19** theme is "Spring Cooking with Cheese on Main and Paired with Whites, Rosé, and Sparkling Wine," and the **April 26** theme is "Cooking Healthy Meals for Kids." Tickets are \$65., which includes six courses, wine, cocktails, and a \$10. donation to the Foodbank. The events start at 6:00 PM and sell out quickly. Please call (732) 455-3275 to reserve your tickets.

2014 Humanitarian Gala

On Saturday, **April 26, 2014**, the gala will celebrate the Foodbank's thirtieth anniversary at Eagle Oaks Golf and Country Club in Farmingdale. The 2014 honorees are: Tom Donovan, President and Publisher, Asbury Park Press; Jim Filip, Restaurateur and Foodbank Board Member Emeritus; Frank's Big and Tall - The Marowitz Family; Agency Partner: "Lunch Break"; and Jr. Humanitarian: Patrick J. Struke. For tickets or more information, please contact Diana Flippo at (732) 918-2600 ext. 224.

Check Out For Hunger

This program is held at many major county supermarkets from **September through January**. At checkout, shoppers can help someone in need by donating \$1., \$3., or \$5. by scanning a coupon that adds the amount to their grocery bill. One hundred percent of all proceeds go to the Foodbank to help end hunger. Ask your local supermarket manager if the store participates in the Check Out For Hunger program.

Students Change Hunger

Organized by the New Jersey Federation of Food Banks, the yearly, state-wide challenge allows students to band together as a school and collect as many pounds of food as possible with the goal of collecting the most pounds out of all the registered schools. In 2013, a total of 168,702 pounds of food was collected for the challenge, with Monmouth and Ocean county schools collecting 71,148 pounds.

The most needed items are proteins such as canned fish, chicken or meat, and peanut butter as well as shelf-stable milk products. With a staff nutritionist on site, a goal for 2014 is to increase the amount of healthier food donations.

Not Just Food

Many people are surprised to learn that the Foodbank changes lives in more ways than by just providing food security. In addition to food distribution and supporting over 270 agencies in the two counties, the Foodbank has several programs to assist low and moderate income county residents.

Participants in the **Culinary Skills Job Training** program become self-sufficient through twelve weeks of onsite and classroom food preparation training by an executive chef. Graduates are assisted with job placement in the Jersey Shore area hospitality industry. The program is supported by grants from Bank of America, JCP&L, Sodexo Foundation, Gannet Foundation, Bunbury Company, Wachovia Foundation, and the Monmouth County Workforce Investment Board. Qualified applicants can attend the program for free. To date, over one hundred thirty trainees have graduated from the program. “The program changes lives,” said Lynch. “I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Another contribution by participants in the Culinary Skills Job Training Program is providing one hundred hot meals a day for children at **Kids Café**, an after school program held at the Asbury Park Boys and Girls Club of Monmouth County. Children not only receive a hot meal, but also get homework help in a safe and nurturing environment. Rodriguez recalled one particular young boy who demonstrated the importance of the Kids Café. “A boy around six-years-old thought he had missed his hot meal for the day. He was crying uncontrollably to the director, because that missed meal would be the only meal he would



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have all day, and he thought he missed it. Seeing something like that grounds you.”

The Foodbank’s **Backpack Program** assists children of chronic hunger at seven schools in Monmouth and Ocean counties. Children are given a backpack of nutritious and easy to make foods to take home on weekends over school vacations, when they might not have food available to them.

The Foodbank’s **Mobile Pantry** is just that—a pantry on wheels that visits areas and low income housing sites that do not have food pantries. County residents can also obtain assistance from the mobile pantry with applying for food stamps.

Finally, the **Volunteer Garden**, onsite at the Foodbank’s Neptune headquarters, reaps crops of fresh produce that are distributed to families in need.

The Foodbank also has two new programs set for 2014.

The first is **VITA, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program**, a free, IRS-sponsored program to help low and middle-income workers have their federal and state personal income taxes prepared and filed electronically at no cost. VITA assists workers in receiving all tax credits, such as the earned income tax credit and child tax credit, to which they are entitled. As a result, more money

will be in the workers’ family budgets, with the hope that they will be able to have more food security.

The second is the Foodbank’s **Health Care Marketplace Navigators Program**. The program has trained personnel to assist low and moderate income families with applying for affordable health insurance. There are several locations throughout the two counties where people can go for assistance from the Health Care Navigators, including sites in Asbury Park, Brick, Neptune, Toms River, and Union Beach. Residents can make an appointment for Health Care Marketplace Navigators assistance by calling (732) 918-2600.

How To Help

Just as the Foodbank is always there for those who need it, there is always a need for help at the Foodbank. One way to help is by making a financial donation, which is tax deductible, as the Foodbank is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization. For every \$25. donated, the Foodbank can provide seventy-five meals to those in need. To make a monetary donation, visit the Foodbank’s website at www.foodbankmoc.org. Click on “Donate” and follow the instructions. Donations can be one-time or monthly, and corporate employer

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match donations are also accepted.

Those who want a more active role, and to really make a difference, can organize either a food drive or an event supporting the Foodbank. Organizing a food drive not only provides food for families in need but also raises hunger awareness. People looking for a more creative way to help can organize an event such as a golf outing, talent show, 5K race, car wash, or art show, where all proceeds are donated directly to the Foodbank. There are great tips for both starting a food drive and holding an event at the Foodbank's website. Click on "How to Help."

Volunteers are always needed throughout the year to help sort food, prepare bulk mailings, fulfill agency orders, help with other clerical needs, and/or assist with a specialized trade or skill such as carpentry or tax preparation. Without the energy, dedication, and spirit of the volunteers, the Foodbank would

not exist. Volunteers must be at least thirteen years of age. Those interested in volunteering should visit the Foodbank's website and click on "Volunteer" to see specific guidelines and fill out an application.

Mother Teresa said, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." People are making a difference and helping those in need at the Jersey Shore by donating, supporting, and volunteering at the Foodbank. ♦

The Foodbank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties is labeled a four-star charity by Charity Navigator, an online watchdog. According to the Foodbank's website, in 2012-2013, \$.96 of every dollar donated went directly to the fight against hunger and poverty. Their offices are located at 3300 Route 66 in Neptune. To contact the Foodbank: phone (732) 918-2600; email: main@foodbankmoc.org; on the web: www.foodbankmoc.org; on Facebook: www.facebook.com/foodbankmoc; on Twitter: @TheFoodBankMOC.

magnet public high school serving students from ninth through twelfth grades. The school offers learning in all subjects, specializing in marine technology and science. M.A.S.T. requires each student to participate in the Naval Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps every year as well as an Annual Military Inspection in the spring.

The campus includes thirteen newly renovated Fort Hancock buildings and laboratories devoted to marine biology, marine chemistry, oceanography, C.A.D., and multi-media. There is also hands-on instruction on the school research vessel, the R/V *Blue Sea*, for underclassmen and some seniors. The R/V *Blue Sea* is currently berthed at the Coast Guard Station on Sandy Hook.

In September 2013, the academy was one of fifteen in New Jersey to be recognized by the United States Department of Education as part of the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program, an award called the "most prestigious honor in the United States' education system."

The Sandy Hook Foundation

This is the official friends group of the National Park Service at the Gateway National Recreation Area, Sandy Hook Unit. Established in 1989, the Foundation's goal is to nurture and protect all of Sandy Hook including Fort Hancock, a National Historic Landmark site, by supporting programs and projects of environmental, historic, and cultural importance. The Sandy Hook Foundation is a not-for-profit charitable organization that relies on the generosity of individuals, foundations, and corporations, as well as dedicated volunteers to reach its goals.

Sandy Hook is much more than a favorite destination for many—it is a multifaceted jewel of the Jersey Shore to treasure and protect. ♦

Special thanks to National Park Service historian Tom Hoffman for his assistance in developing this article.

Items Needed By The Foodbank:

- Canned Tuna
- Canned Chicken
- Canned Beef Stew
- Non-Perishable Milk
- Peanut Butter
- Jelly
- Macaroni and Cheese
- Canned Pork and Beans
- Rice
- Pasta
- Canned Vegetables
- Canned Fruits
- Canned Soups/
Dry Soup Mix Packages
- Baged Dried Grains
- Canned Juices
- Sip-Size Juices
- Hot and Cold Cereals



To donate: www.foodbankmoc.org.