

MENDOCINO COUNTY FOOD BANKS

April 3, 2013

SUMMARY

The 2012-2013 Grand Jury (GJ) received complaints from clients who use Mendocino County food banks (FBs). The complaints alleged that workers were taking food meant for low-income clients. The GJ learned that 95% of the workers/volunteers are also clients. In Ukiah, the workers/volunteers receive their allotment first, creating the perception of stealing and/or favoritism. The GJ determined food loss through pilferage was negligible and not an issue. However, the GJ decided to conduct an in-depth investigation of the FBs focusing on the needs of county residents, the accomplishments and difficulties of running FBs, and to gain knowledge on the general operations. The agencies that manage Fort Bragg, Willits, and Ukiah FBs cooperated with the GJ's investigation and provided information on operations and funding.

In Mendocino County, 20% of the 90,000 population is below the poverty level and needs help obtaining additional food. In the past four years, the demand on FB services has increased while government funding and donations for food programs have diminished. All three FBs are dependent on community contributions. Each agency is working with limited resources and in spite of the challenges, the GJ was impressed with the accomplishments each has achieved. All clients interviewed expressed gratitude for what they receive.

Improvements should be made in food distribution practices, volunteer training, and access to written policies. Significant disparity in the quality, quantity, and nutritional value of food among the three FBs was evident to the GJ during site visits. On certain distribution days, the GJ observed food that was inedible. Ukiah FB administration should establish a relationship with the Redwood Empire Food Bank (REFB) in order to participate in purchasing fresh produce for their clients at greatly reduced prices. Also noted was the unfair distribution of perishables to the senior/disabled clients. Most of the FB staff are volunteers, some are court ordered; their responses from GJ questions indicated the need for additional training of the policies and procedures. Clients expressed the need for instructions on how to cook and prepare staples (rice and beans) and the meaning of date and expiration labels. Each FB should make available educational materials on food preparation and expiration dates to the clientele. The FB board members must be familiar with their organization's policies and visit the FB to observe distribution and operations. All three Executive Directors should meet quarterly to exchange information.

GLOSSARY

Block Grants: Federal funding for programs administered through Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency.

Client: A person who meets the USDA income-based qualification.

Feeding America: A national organization which networks with food banks to provide nutritious, fresh foods to low income people in the fight against hunger.

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency provides funds to purchase food staples for emergencies

Food bank: A non-profit or charitable institution that solicits, collects, warehouses, and distributes donated food.

Food pantry: A food bank outreach program for low-income clients in remote rural areas.

Ford Street Project: The umbrella organization that manages the Ukiah Community Center, the Ukiah Food Bank, as well as other community based social programs.

Member Agency: Any 501(c)3 or faith based organization whose application is accepted by Redwood Empire Food Bank (REFB) and agrees to distribute food to low-income people, free of charge or donation.

Poverty level: An annual household income measurement to determine eligibility for federal programs significantly lower than the self-sufficiency standards.

Redwood Empire Food Bank: A food bank in Santa Rosa, which is an affiliate of Feeding America and is assigned jurisdiction to Sonoma and Mendocino Counties.

Self-sufficiency Standards: The amount of income needed to meet basic needs in a particular county. In Mendocino County, the income requirement for a family of three is just under \$50,000 a year.

USDA/Commodities: United States Department of Agriculture purchases and distributes canned and food staples to all States.

BACKGROUND

The 2012-2013 GJ received complaints that workers were removing food meant for FB clients. During the initial visit to the Ukiah FB, the GJ observed clients standing in line for several hours, prior to the opening of the FB, to receive a minimal amount of food. While these clients stood in line, they witnessed volunteers taking food. These volunteers are also clients and receive their food first, prior to the public. This practice led to an appearance of theft. As the GJ began its investigation, an awareness of the increased need for FBs in Mendocino County became apparent. The GJ chose to investigate the overall operations of FBs and the increasing need for effective food programs.

APPROACH

The GJ reviewed financial documents, operational procedures, reports and conducted interviews with administrators, staff, volunteers, members of the Board of Directors and clients participating in the FB programs. The GJ made multiple site visits to observe the operation on distribution days, including general distribution, senior and disabled distribution, and emergency food distribution.

DISCUSSION

Mendocino County has a population of approximately 87,841. The 2012 Census reported a poverty rate of 20% (17,569) in Mendocino County. Census Bureau Statistics report 39% of households in our county live below self-sufficiency standards. One in eight citizens sought food assistance at FBs last year, representing an increase of 46% since 2006. Public perception is that clients are the unemployed, transients, and "panhandlers". Transients represent five percent of clients served. There is an increase from prior years of single mothers, working-poor, homeless families, and senior citizens using the FBs. USDA client eligibility determinations are by household income, which is \$1,396 monthly for the first person, plus \$495 for each additional household member. The USDA does not require client income verification to participate in FB programs. Clients self-certify their income. The USDA requires FBs to keep records of the number of clients served.

There are three FBs and six food pantries serving Mendocino County communities. All three FBs are associated with Community Centers that provide help to low-income clients by providing varied social services and referrals when needed. The three FBs, Fort Bragg, Willits, and Ukiah, each has an Executive Director, a Board of Directors and a minimal number of employees. Each FB has many volunteers including individuals performing community services/work credits ordered by the Superior Court. Most of the volunteers are also clients. Each FB operates on a limited budget. Donations pay for operational costs and the purchase of additional food. The County distributes small grants from the Federal government to the FBs. Each FB has had to raise significant funds for capital improvements, equipment, and upgrades. Currently, both funding and donations have decreased for all FBs. The three FBs follow approved financial practices and have annual audits performed by a certified public accountant.

Fort Bragg food bank is the distribution hub for USDA commodities for all FBs and pantries in Mendocino County. USDA Commodities received at the Fort Bragg FB are delivered monthly by a non-profit called FoodLink which works in conjunction with EFAP. Examples of one month's commodities include canned vegetables, meat, pasta, and fresh eggs. USDA commodities are available to each client household once a month in addition to their weekly FB visits. "Emergency" food is available to clients only once every 90 days. Each FB maintains an inventory of USDA commodities. Food donations come from food drives, supermarkets, bakeries, and farmers. Food is weighed to track inventory. The GJ observed the quality and quantity of food given to clients varies from day to day. The GJ was told all food is inspected prior to distribution and stale or spoiled

items are given to farmers for animal feed or discarded. However, the GJ observed moldy bread and spoiled produce distributed at both Ukiah and Willits FBs. Clients made complaints to the GJ about the quality of the food.

The number of clients served at each FB varies with the time of month as clients exhaust their funds and have used up the dollar amount of their CalFresh cards (formerly food stamps). Client numbers are also higher in months when family expenses increase due to additional bills such as taxes and insurance. Some clients do not know how to cook and others have no cooking facilities. Clients also do not understand the meaning of the *Use by, Sell by, or Best By if Used Before*, dates on canned goods, dairy products, etc. As a result, clients may consider useable food unsafe. Information the GJ received stated, high-acid canned foods such as tomatoes, grapefruit and pineapple will retain best quality on the shelf for 12 to 18 months; low-acid canned foods such as meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables will retain best quality on the shelf for 2 to 5 years.

Fort Bragg

The 2012 FB budget was \$309,284. The projected income for 2013 is \$291,440, which will result in a deficit if no additional funds become available. Fort Bragg FB is a member agency of the Redwood Empire Food Bank (REFB) in Santa Rosa. REFB is an affiliate of Feeding America. As a member, a Fort Bragg FB representative is able to shop at the REFB warehouse at greatly reduced prices to provide their clients with the best nutritional food possible. The FB picks up an average of 3,800 lbs of food weekly. Included are hundreds of pounds of "Farm to Family" fresh produce at a cost of 3 cents per pound. Other foods picked up are at a cost of 9 cents per pound. Fort Bragg FB transports this food to the Willits FB, also a member agency of the REFB. Fort Bragg FB distributes food to approximately 2,000 clients per month. Fort Bragg FB spent \$59,000 in 2012 on all food purchased. The food available to clients observed by the GJ was fresh. Fort Bragg volunteers/clients choose their food prior to the FB opening at the direction of administration. No problems with the perception on misappropriation of food were reported. The Fort Bragg FB has an up to date, transparent, and informative web site that includes budget and agency tax returns. The GJ was impressed with the administration of the Fort Bragg FB.

Ukiah

The proposed 2012-2013 budget for the Ukiah FB is approximately \$140,000, of which 8.5% is administrative cost. The local newspaper's recent FB fund-drive raised \$95,000 over \$10,000 less than the previous year. Donated funds do not pay for administrative costs; however, they are used for operational costs. The number of clients served in Ukiah varies from 1,200 to 2,400 per month. Seniors represent 22%, adults 58%, and children 20% of persons served. Ukiah FB uses a number system for distribution. Each client receives a number upon arrival at the FB. They often line up two hours prior to the FB opening. Clients need to get a low number to receive limited items such as milk, eggs, and on rare occasions, meat. Volunteers choose their food while clients are present

waiting for food pick up. This policy has given the appearance of impropriety. When asked, volunteers were unaware of the procedures for receiving their food allotment. They were following the customary practice.

The food observed by the GJ was of poor quality and quantity. The GJ visited five distribution days in Ukiah and observed better quality and quantity of food on “general” distribution day than on “senior/disabled” day. Ukiah is not a participant in the REFB program. Supplemental food is purchased at a local discount grocery store at a cost of \$1500-\$1800 per month, resulting in much greater supplemental food costs than the REFB program’s 3 cents per pound for fresh produce and 9 cents per pound for other foods. Fresh produce is rarely purchased. Donated produce is extremely limited and appeared in damaged condition.

The Executive Director oversees the Ford Street Project, the Buddy Eller Center, as well as the Ukiah Community Center (UCC) and Food Bank. The merger of the UCC and its FB under the Ford Street Project reduced administrative costs and added to the workload of the Executive Director. The GJ interviewed several members of the Board of Directors, none of whom were familiar with the policies and procedures. Only two had ever visited the FB.

Willits

The Willits Agency budget for 2012-2013 is \$135,140. Operational expenditures in 2012 for the FB were \$41,000 plus \$5,000 for additional food purchases. Willits FB is a partner agency in the REFB program and receives between 200-500 pounds of food weekly including fresh produce: potatoes, apples, oranges, cauliflower, carrots, strawberries, cantaloupes, squash, celery, etc. Fresh produce is purchased for 3 cents a pound. Fort Bragg FB delivers this food to Willits for an additional 2 cents per pound to help offset transportation costs. The FB depends on numerous food drives and local donations. Last year, Willits FB raised additional funds by holding baseball and cribbage tournaments. The number of clients served varies between 960 and 1200 per month, of which 35% are children. The number of transients using the FB increases in the summer. Clients receive USDA commodities with other donated foods twice a month. The facility’s limited space precludes setting-up food distribution lines. All distributed food is pre-bagged, including fresh produce. The GJ observed some bruised food items but overall the food choices were good on distribution days. Baby food and formula are available upon request. In Willits, to avoid the appearance of impropriety, volunteers/clients pick up their food allotment on a non-scheduled workday.

FINDINGS

- F1. Certain practices of the Ukiah FB led to the perception of misappropriations of food by volunteers. Clients do not know the policies and procedures regarding their food allotment.

- F2. Many clients do not know how to prepare staples and do not understand the meaning of dates stamped on food products, such as *best by/use by/good for a week after sell by date, and expired on*.
- F3. In Ukiah, the merger of the UCC and Ford Street Project Board of Directors and the selection of one Executive Director increased the workload of the Director and lessened the amount of available time dedicated to the FB.
- F4. Most Ukiah board members are not familiar with the FB operation, procedures, and food distribution.
- F5. In Ukiah, there is inequality in the distribution of food between the “general distribution” and “senior/disabled distribution”. The overall quality and quantity of food is deficient.
- F6. Ukiah does not participate in the REFB. Willits and Fort Bragg appear to benefit from participation in the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. FB Managers train all clients and volunteers on the procedures for receiving their food allotment. The training should be based on easily accessible written policies. (F1)
- R2. The Board of Directors of each FB visits their FB at least twice a year to observe food distribution and overall operation. Board meeting notes shall include a written report of these site visits. (F4)
- R3. Ukiah FB management staff applies to become a participant in the REFB program. (F6)
- R4. Ukiah FB management staff develops a procedure to ensure that general and senior/disabled distribution is of equal quality and quantity of food. (F5)
- R5. The Administrators of the three FBs meet periodically to exchange information, best practices, operations, and website design. (F1-F6)
- R6. FB management creates and distributes educational materials to clients for instruction on the preparation of food staples and the meaning of expiration dates stamped on food products. (F2)

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the following responses are *requested*:

- Nancy Severy, Executive Director Fort Bragg Food Bank: respond to F2,F6 and R2,R5,R6 within 60 days

- Jim Marill, Executive Director, Willits Community Service and Food Bank: respond to F2,F6 and R2,R5,R6 within 60 days
- Jacque Williams, Executive Director, UCC and Ford Street Project: respond to F1-F6 and R1-R6 within 60 days

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

The following governing bodies have been sent courtesy copies:

- Mendocino County Health and Human Services
- Mendocino County Board of Supervisors