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Food bank donations rise to meet increased demand

Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

Grocers, food manufacturers, and other companies are boosting donations of meat, dairy products, produce and other items to Metro Detroit food banks to help them serve the growing number of families struggling to put meals on the table.

Companies like Kroger Co., Meijer Inc., and Wal-Mart Corp. have stepped up donations in recent months and others are joining the effort for the first time as the region reels from the slumping automotive industry, housing and credit woes.

Ninety-three Kroger stores in Metro Detroit are giving left over food products to Forgotten Harvest -- a food rescue program in Oak Park -- up from 19 stores three years ago, organizers said. And just this week, the Ohio-based grocer, the largest in Michigan, presented four Michigan emergency food agencies, including Forgotten Harvest, with \$150,000 in cash and food.



Johnnie Young of Detroit drives a truck for Forgotten Harvest food bank five days a week, picking up donated food items. (John T. Greilick / The Detroit News)

As workers lose their jobs and suffer other financial difficulties, the need for food and money is imperative, said Jane Marshall, director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan, which represents nine food banks throughout the state.

Food banks, she said, distributed 30 percent to 40 percent more food in 2008, compared with the previous year, and the need for businesses to dig deeper in their pockets and pitch in is more important than ever.

"It's critical," she said. "We only give out what we are given. That's the only way we can survive."

No agency tracks the number of Michigan residents in need of food, but food banks say their hand-outs have jumped 30 percent to 40 percent in the past year.

Of the 4.3 million people living in southeastern Michigan in 2005, 600,000 were living in poverty, according to the 2005 U.S. Census, the most recent federal statistics available.

Firms increase donations

Companies are giving food banks more perishable food, money, gift cards and even vehicles to pick up donations.

Grand Rapids-based Meijer made an agreement with Forgotten Harvest to collect surplus food items from eight stores and over the holiday ran a program called Simply Give, which allowed customers to buy \$10 gift cards to be donated to a food bank. All of the chain's 185 stores in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio chose a food bank to help.

"It's not hard to look around and see things are tough," said Frank Guglielmi, a Meijer spokesman. "The need is greater and pantries need help."

Last month, Kroger helped Forgotten Harvest organize a Stuff the Truck event at Kroger stores in Metro Detroit. Customers donated 17,000 pounds of food -- valued at about \$25,000.

"Yes, we are giving more," said Kroger spokesman Dale Hollandsworth. "As a food company, we have an obligation to those who need food as well as those who can buy food."

Even national companies like Kraft Foods Inc. are pitching in.

Kraft, which also helped with the Stuff the Truck event, donated \$52,000 to Forgotten Harvest in December.

Kraft has had a long relationship with Feeding America, which has locations in Michigan. This year, the company tripled its donations and also donated 25 trucks to give away food in the country's neediest communities.

"As America's leading food company, we're stepping up our efforts," said spokeswoman Lisa Gibbons. "There's an increased need among many families and we feel we need to be part of the solution."

Trucks give big boost

The extra donations lift a big burden off the shoulders of local food banks, which are struggling to keep up with demand. Without corporate gifts and donations, the local food banks say they wouldn't be able to help as many people.

Monica Luoma, communications director at Forgotten Harvest, the nation's second-largest food rescue program, said Kroger donated \$50,000 in food and money on Monday.

The program received three refrigerated trucks from Daimler Financial Services in 2007 and those trucks have been used to help collect surplus food from more than 400 grocers, caterers and farmers for distribution among 150 emergency food programs in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. Its needs shot up 30 percent in 2008.

Corporate donations "are a lifeblood for us," she said. "It's absolutely vital. We wouldn't exist without it."

Eastern Michigan Food Bank in Flint last year started a food pick-up program and has agreements with 22 Kroger stores and 12 Meijer stores. It will begin picking up food at Super Wal-Mart stores in April.

The food bank distributes to more than 500 soup kitchens and pantries in 22 counties, helping more than 400,000 families and individuals.

"Are companies helping more? Absolutely," said Bill Kerr, president.

The outpouring has been a blessing for Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeast Michigan. In the past two years, Gleaners has received new or increased donations from 562 businesses, including the Collision Industry Foundation, an organization that represents auto collision companies. The Detroit food bank provided 21 million free meals last year.

"It's always a little bit humbling to see how many are willing to make a sacrifice," said Gerry Brisson, senior vice president of advancement. "It's awe-inspiring."