

Mobile Farmers Market Delivers Fresh Produce And A Side Of Nutrition Education To Low-Income Communities In San Joaquin County

With the economy in crisis, unemployment on the rise, and cuts in government assistance programs, many Californians find themselves struggling to feed their families. While food insecurity is not new, emergency food banks, which distribute donated food at no charge to clients, are seeing a notable increase in demand for services.

Founded in 1968, the Emergency Food Bank of San Joaquin County today serves more than 1,000 people a day from its main location in the city of Stockton and from 15 satellite pantries throughout the county. A far cry from the old “free cheese” stereotype, “Our food bags are packed with an eye to balanced nutrition, and always include fresh fruits and vegetables,” says executive director Tim Viall. “We also prepare special bags for people with specific health problems such as diabetes, AIDS, high blood pressure, and heart trouble, and we provide ongoing nutrition education and cooking classes.”

In 2006, the food bank banded together with more than 30 nutrition agencies, churches, and schools to form a Hunger Task Force aimed at reducing hunger and food insecurity in Stockton and San Joaquin

County. A centerpiece of the task force’s efforts is a Mobile Farmer’s Market (MFM) that visits 54 sites per month in low-income communities. Support for the project comes from Kaiser Permanente, Health Plan of San Joaquin, Catholic Healthcare West, California Association of Food Banks, and other funders. In addition, the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) is collaborating with MFM and its partners to help create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley.

“Acre for acre, the San Joaquin Valley has some of the most productive agricultural land in the world,” Viall explains, “but a lot of it gets shipped elsewhere, to other parts of the country and of the world. With the Mobile Farmers Market, we want to educate our clients about the nutritional value and good taste of these locally-grown fresh fruits and vegetables that they might otherwise bypass in favor of less healthy choices.”

Starting with a single donated van, the Mobile Farmers Market began making regular monthly stops at senior centers, churches, and other community and faith organizations. Bags



The San Joaquin Emergency Food Bank provides residents with a variety of foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

of produce are handed out to all comers, no questions asked, regardless of income, citizenship, or other criteria. A typical summer-season bag might include squash, corn, potatoes, a whole watermelon, and cherries. The MFM serves some 2,000 families each month, and because the van follows a regular monthly delivery schedule, people know when it’s coming and at some sites begin lining up even before it arrives.

“We are giving out not only fruits and vegetables, but nutrition education at the same time,” emphasizes Anna Martin of the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE), a key partner in the project providing training and technical support through the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP). “People will say, ‘I don’t know how to cook this,’

San Joaquin County's Mobile Farmers Market (Continued)

and you can see the skeptical look on their faces.”

Knowing that people are more likely to try something new if it's aesthetically pleasing, MFM staffers prepare tasting and cooking demonstrations at every stop. The tasting demos rotate seasonally, introducing a new vegetable and concept every month. During July, for example, the MFM might feature a refreshing avocado salad accented with orange, jicama, and cilantro.

“We demo'd this salad at a senior center and at first no one wanted it,” recalls LaCresia Hawkins of Community Partnership for Families. “Then we passed it back to some of the younger folks in the room, who loved it, and soon everyone was eating it!” Other food demos have included eggplant, peaches, and sweet potatoes.

These fun, “quick-stop” nutrition courses help market the food

bank's comprehensive six-hour nutrition course offered at its main location and in community centers. This free course teaches people how to read nutrition labels, how to develop a family food budget, basic food safety, and how to get children to eat their vegetables. Pre- and post-education testing shows that the training works and is helping families eat a healthier diet.

The MFM has an additional outreach function: “We try to find out if people we meet are eligible for food stamps,” says Martin. “We explain the process and help them determine whether they qualify. Our goal is to assist them with as many avenues as possible to get through to the end of each month and ultimately to get off the food bank circuit.”

With a second donated van, the Mobile Farmers Market has been expanding and so far food donations have been keeping pace with demand. Approximately

90 percent of the produce distributed is donated, by everyone from individual gardeners and farmers to supermarkets and large consumer food manufacturers. The rest is purchased at reduced prices through the California Association of Food Banks.

“The Mobile Farmers Market really becomes a platform from which to experiment, to see what works,” says Viall. “Now we're moving into education around container gardening, showing how to grow your own food wherever you live. And we're starting to field calls from other food banks interested in this model we've developed.”

For more information:

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program: www.ccropp.org, (559) 228-2140

Emergency Food Bank Stockton/San Joaquin: www.stocktonfoodbank.org

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