

Community FoodBank of New Jersey Follows Recipe for Success

This Hillside-based organization benefits half a million New Jerseyans

By Julie Jacobs



Kathleen DiChiara, president and CEO of the 22-year-old Community FoodBank of New Jersey, actually began her crusade to feed the hungry in 1975 when she collected food items from her fellow parishioners, stored them in her home and delivered them from the trunk of her car to elderly people and families in need. Soon companies were calling to donate food and she was fortunate to acquire space through the Archdiocese of Newark to run her flourishing operation. In 1982, she formally established

the FoodBank as a non-profit corporation, which distributed 75,000 pounds of food in its first year.

Fast forward to fiscal year 2003-2004, when that figure catapulted to 22 million. Today, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey assists 1,500 charities in 18 counties throughout the state to feed 500,000 people. It distributes food from its 280,000-square-foot headquarters in Hillside to emergency pantries, soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless and battered women, as well as rehab and daycare centers and

youth and senior citizen programs.

Belonging to America's Second Harvest, a national food bank network, it also disburses food indirectly through three subsidiary distribution organizations in Trenton, Phillipsburg and Neptune. It also maintains a southern branch in Egg Harbor Township to serve Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and parts of Burlington counties.

"We've certainly grown in terms of poundage and scope," says DiChiara. "If this were a profit-making endeavor, it would be similar to a \$50 million-a-year business."

What's cooking at the FoodBank

The daily tasks of receiving, sorting, storing and moving out fresh, frozen and refrigerated foods make for a highly active environment. While most of its supplies are donated by supermarkets and manufacturers, the FoodBank also receives contributions from corporate and licensed commercial kitchens, hotels, restaurants, airlines, hospitals and caterers through its Prepared Food Program. The program, the first of its kind in New Jersey, gathers unused food from these facilities for distribution to soup kitchens and shelters.

The FoodBank's Fresh Produce Program accepts produce from supermarkets that has lost its luster and salability, but is still safe to eat. Items are sent expeditiously to agencies and pantries, with leftovers dispatched to farms to feed pigs rather than go to waste.

Additionally, the FoodBank purchases food commodities in bulk from the federal government and then sells them to other agencies at cost.

"Food banks and pantries are terms that are often used interchangeably, but they're not the same thing," stresses Meara Nigro, director of communications, pointing out the "loose shopping" area where representatives from soup kitchens or emergency pantries can take what's needed for either a meal or a particular family in distress. "A food bank is a warehouse

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