

PLYMOUTH FOOD WAREHOUSE

by Michelle Conway

The deep rumbling growls of hunger are morphing slowly into a dull stabbing pain; kitchen cabinets are stacked with dishes, but little food. It's another two weeks until the next paycheck, which must be stretched to cover rent, electricity and gas for the car. The hunger pains turn to anxiety as the realization settles in; it's time. The bills can't be paid and there isn't enough food in the kitchen to feed the family. It's time to ask for help.

For families hovering around the poverty line in Plymouth and Bristol Counties, this desperate moment is all too real. The Greater Plymouth Food Resources Group, a division of the South Shore Community Action Council (SSCAC) answers the need to fill the local food pantries and soup kitchens in an ongoing mission to combat hunger on the South Shore. Their ultimate goal is to "get more nutritious food to more hungry people in a more cost-effective way through coordinated food pick-up, transport, storage and distribution."

To qualify for federal assistance, a family of four must make less than \$407.80 per month, that's \$13.59 per day to feed, clothe and shelter four people. As of the 2006 census, over 123,000 people in the 36 towns in Plymouth and Bristol Counties live below the federal guidelines for poverty. The number of people who are

marginalized between official poverty and a decent living wage is a "moving target and difficult to quantify" says Beth Thompson, Food Resources Manager for the South Shore Community Action Council. For these families, hunger is real.

Beth, a handful of part time employees, and a small corps of devoted volunteers operate the Greater Plymouth Food Resource Group Food Warehouse which acts as a central location to receive and distribute donated food items for emergency food providers such as food pantries and soup kitchens. Volunteers and staff members from these agencies visit the Food Warehouse and distribute the food to those who fall within federal poverty guidelines and to those who are living in between federal poverty guidelines and a living wage.

Through resourcefulness, creativity and the cooperation of local communities, the Food Warehouse supplies much needed staples for 14 emergency food providers from Wareham to Norwell, three Head Start programs, and many Meals-on-Wheels programs. In all, over 200,000 pounds of food move through the warehouse each year and even that isn't enough to satisfy the growing demand brought on by the difficult economy.

While the need for food is great, many generous and thoughtful people throughout the South Shore hear the call to action. School groups, civic organizations, churches and local postal carriers collect non-perishable food items for the Food Warehouse throughout the year. Beth Thompson and the staff members at the SSCAC coordinate the food drives and find new ways to bring healthful, fresh foods to those in need of assistance.

HEALTHY PERISHABLES PROGRAM

For families and individuals fighting poverty, purchasing high cost fresh fruits and vegetables is nearly impossible. Feeding a family and providing staples on fewer than \$5 a day forces lower-income shoppers to purchase economically priced items that are not nutritionally diverse. Food pantries are stocked with non-perishable canned fruits, vegetables, pastas and convenience foods.

The SSCAC, in an innovative bid to bring fresh produce to the table, has created the "Healthy Perishables" program with funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and assistance from Senator Therese Murray. Senator Murray has worked with the Healthy Perishables program since its inception to ensure it is funded. The SSCAC contracts with three local farms to sell their



fresh produce to the Food Warehouse at below market value. The fruits and vegetables are picked up weekly from Colchester Farm in Plympton, Golden Rule Farm in Middleboro, and Hanson Farm in Bridgewater by volunteers and delivered to 14 Councils on Aging as well as to the Food Warehouse for distribution to food pantries and soup kitchens. Fresh lettuces, squash, tomatoes, peas and berries provide a much-needed boost of nutrition, color and flavor.

A handful of smaller growers and food providers donate fresh eggs, small batches of seasonal produce and local products which are stored at the Food Warehouse and picked up by local food pantries and soup kitchens.

Frank Albani, Director of the Soule Homestead Education Center and an organic farmer for Golden Rule farm in Middleboro, provided fresh zucchini, summer squash, lettuce, cucumbers and onions this past summer - 3,000 pounds of produce in all. "We have all experienced hunger at one time or another; I myself went on food stamps for a while right out of college." Frank is excited to share his organic vegetables with people who might not have access to the produce he sells at farmers markets and stores such as Whole Foods; the need to reach out and help "is always in the backs of our minds" at Golden Rule.

Michelle Conway has lived on the South Shore for 8 years and is the Manager of Gourmet Services at Foodie's Market in Duxbury. As a freelance writer, she has penned articles for the Boston Globe and writes a regular column, "South Shore Gourmet", for the Duxbury Clipper and the Express papers. Michelle is taking classes towards a Masters in Gastronomy at Boston University and is the Membership Director for the Boston Chapter of Les Dames D'Escoffier

LOCAL RESTAURANTS HELP

The Olive Garden and Panera Bread in Plymouth, and the Longhorn Steakhouse in Wareham make regular donations to the Food Warehouse through nationwide programs created by their headquarters. Phillip Sheinis, General Manager of The Olive Garden in Plymouth explains that his restaurant participates in "The Harvest Program" as a way of extending the "Italian spirit of generosity" to those in need. His chefs follow stringent guidelines for packaging and freezing menu items that aren't used within a specified meal period. The Olive Garden packages "made from scratch", homemade items such as lasagnas, pastas, soups and sauces. Volunteers from the Food Warehouse pick up several hundred packaged meals each month and return them to the Warehouse's freezers. Soup kitchens and emergency food assistance organizations "shop" the freezers and serve these healthful entrees to their clients.

TO DONATE:

- Donations of non-perishable food items are accepted on Wednesdays from 9:00am to 12:00pm at the Plymouth Food Warehouse, 14 Apollo Eleven Road, Plymouth
- The Food Warehouse also holds four major collection days each year in the greater Plymouth area on the first Saturday in March, June, September and December. The next food drive will occur on December 6th.
Note: The September 2008 Drive brought in over 3000 pounds of food.
- Monetary donations can be mailed to:
South Shore Community Action Council, Inc.
265 South Meadow Road, Plymouth MA 02360
- Businesses, civic organizations, farms and food producers looking to participate as well as anyone with general questions should contact Beth Thompson at 508-747-7575, ext. 251 or at btompson@ssac.org.
- For additional information please go to: www.sscac.org



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