



CARRIE ROSEMA/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Soft drinks are rarely in short supply at food banks. At the Second Harvest Food Bank in Riverside, Tiffany Ortega is collecting food for use by a summer camp program run by Ability First, an organization for children and adults with disabilities.

HEALTHY CONCERN

Agencies' focus shifts from filling bellies to giving recipients a more balanced diet

BY LEAH MESSINGER
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

On a recent Monday, Greg Morin pulled open the darkly tinted door of his local food bank and asked for something to eat.

The small brown box the 43-year-old San Bernardino resident received held enough food — cans of corn, peaches, peas, spaghetti and cranberry juice — to keep his stomach from growling for a few days.

"It all looks like nutritional food, and I'm very grateful for it," Morin said.

On that day, Morin was lucky. During a recent trip to several Inland food banks, items waiting to be distributed included: Cookie Crisp cereal, Everlasting Gobstopper jawbreakers, Andy Capp's Fries snacks, Mini Oreos and Wonka Donutz, chocolate-coated candy resembling a doughnut.

Such processed convenience foods are the source of growing national debate among food banks, including those in the Inland region, over whether they should distribute all food received, regardless of nutritional value, or only the more health-

ON THE WEB

■ Some food bank recipients say the nutritional value of the food they receive is secondary to eliminating hunger. **PE.com**



ful items.

As more attention is paid to obesity rates among low-income populations, many of the nation's more than 200 food banks are re-evaluating their mission statements to determine how best to serve the more than 38 million Americans who the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates are in need of food aid.

The food distributed by food banks to agencies and individuals across the country often includes less nutritious items, according to Frank Buck, a retired California Department of Health Services employee who worked on a statewide food-bank nutrition project.

The junk foods, high in calories and usually low in nutrients, can make the belly feel full, but over time, they also can lead to weight gain and diminish a person's prospects for long-term health and survival.

SEE NUTRITION/A5

INLAND FOOD BANKS

These food banks serve hungry people in Inland-area communities:

FIND INC.

- Location: Cathedral City
- People served: 100,000 per month on average
- Food distributed: 5.4 million pounds per year
- Distribution sites: 90

SECOND HARVEST FOOD BANK

- Location: Riverside
- People served: 150,000 per month on average
- Food distributed: 22 million pounds per year
- Distribution sites: 400

COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP OF SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY FOOD BANK

- Location: San Bernardino
- People served: 97,000 per month on average
- Food distributed: 4.5 million pounds per year
- Distribution sites: 170

NUTRITION: Food bank officials recognizing 'all calories are not created equal'

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according to the U.S. surgeon general.

"This is a paradigm shift for food banks," said David Goodman, executive director of the Redwood Empire Food Bank in Northern California. "Before, we just used to reflect whatever was available. Whatever came through the doors was what we distributed."

Food banks give little input on what they receive from donors, said Daryl Brock, who runs the Second Harvest Food Bank that serves Riverside and San Bernardino counties. And often, the least nutritious foods are the ones that can sit longest on a food bank's shelves. They don't require refrigeration and are less likely than produce to spoil before they reach recipients.

Of the 2 billion pounds of food received by America's Second Harvest, a national food bank network, the majority is donated by grocers, distributors, manufacturers and growers. A quarter of the food received by the network is from the Agriculture Department's Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program, said Ross Fraser, a Second Harvest spokesman.

Despite the potential risks of offending donors and the logistical difficulties of transporting more produce, some food banks already have made changes.

The Los Angeles Regional Food Bank hired a nutrition manager last year to educate agencies on healthful eating. The food bank refuses certain products, such as soft drinks, from donors with whom it has long-standing relationships, said Darren Hoffman, a spokesman.

In 2005, the Alameda County Community Food Bank also began phasing out soft drinks from its warehouse. And it started an ambitious campaign to ensure that at least 75 percent of the food it distributes is nutritious.

Others, such as the Redwood Empire Food Bank, are pursuing donations from health-food companies.

"Food banks are just like the public," said Jessica Bartholow, spokeswoman for the California Association of Food Banks, a membership organization that represents 36 banks. "We're all being educated about the fact that all calories are not created equal."

LAND OF ABUNDANCE

As early as the Depression, the federal government distributed staples such as flour, rice and oil "as a way of preventing hunger and malnutrition," said Ed Cooney, executive director of the Congressional Hunger Center, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Today, in a country that produces enough food to provide each person with 3,900 calories per day — nearly double what most bodies require — the shelves of food-aid organizations look different.

"The food supply has changed," said Kim Prendergast, America's Second Harvest's nutrition manager.

Like the typical grocery store, food-bank warehouses often are filled with shelf-stable convenience foods. In addition to flour and oil, many banks now carry butter-flavored microwave popcorn and chocolate Chex Mix.

Over time, a diet of high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods can lead to obesity and health problems, even among those who are food insecure, according to a 2003 study in the *Journal of Nutrition*.

In 2003, 39 percent of adults in San Bernardino County and 32 percent of adults in Riverside County with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level were food insecure, according to the California Health Interview Survey. The same survey showed that 60 percent of inland adults and teens at the same poverty level were overweight or obese.

"A lot of people see obese people or obese children, and they wonder, 'Well, these people can't be hungry because they're overweight, because they're obviously getting enough food,'" said Hoffman, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank spokesman.

But many times, low-income people risk becoming overweight or obese by "trying to stretch their dollars with macaroni and cheese or inexpensive hamburgers," he said.

DONATION TWO-STEP

Each year, 5.4 billion pounds of food — enough for 100,000 people each month — pass



Keith Horn picks up baked goods for the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County Food Bank at a distribution center.

FOOD FACTS: A sampling of food available in August at the Second Harvest Food Bank serving Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

1. Wonka Everlasting Gobstopper Candy

Serving size: 9 pieces
Calories: 60
Fat: 0g
Protein: 0g

2. Athenos Feta

Serving size: 1 oz.
Calories: 80
Fat: 6g
Protein: 6g

3. Act II Mini

Bags Butter popcorn
Serving size: 3
tablespoons, unpopped
Calories: 210
Fat: 14g
Protein: 3g

4. Miracle Whip

Serving size: 0.5 oz.
Calories: 40
Fat: 3.5g
Protein: 0g

5. Wonka Donutz Candy

Serving size: 1 package
Calories: 220
Fat: 12g
Protein: 2g

6. Small white potatoes*

Serving size: 3 potatoes (raw)
Calories: 357
Fat: 0.5g
Protein: 9g

*Potato nutritional data from USDA
Nutrient Data Laboratory

7. Teasdale Pinto Beans

Serving size: 1 cup
Calories: 60
Fat: 0g
Protein: 6g

8. Barbara's Bakery Original Shredded Wheat

Serving size: 2 biscuits
Calories: 140
Fat: 1g
Protein: 4g
High in fiber

9. Smucker's Organic Creamy Peanut Butter

Serving size: 2 tablespoons
Calories: 210
Fat: 16g
Protein: 8g

10. Chex Mix Bold Party Blend

Serving size: 1 cup
Calories: 140
Fat: 6g
Protein: 3g

11. Veg-all Sweet Peas & Carrots

Serving size: 1 cup
Calories: 60
Fat: 0g
Protein: 2g

12. Albertsons Cream Soda

Serving size: 12 oz.
Calories: 160
Fat: 0g
Protein: 0g

TAKING STOCK

Food banks face several logistical challenges in their efforts to bring together surplus and donated food and the hungry people who need it.

NEW PRODUCTS:

In 2000, 9,145 new food products entered the retail food market. Improvements in food technology mean many packaged foods can now sit on a food bank shelf for years. Many convenience foods end up in food banks.

FOOD NEEDS:

12.4 percent of households in California were food insecure at some time from 2002 through 2004. This means that members of those households at times had difficulty meeting basic food needs. In 2003,

36 PERCENT OF adults in SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY and 32 PERCENT OF adults in RIVERSIDE COUNTY with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level were food insecure, meaning they did not have assured access to enough food. According to that year's federal poverty level guidelines, 200 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four was an annual income of \$36,800.

SOURCES: 2003 CALIFORNIA HEALTH INTERVIEW SURVEY, USDA FOOD ASSISTANCE & NUTRITION RESEARCH PROGRAM AND USDA ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE

through the 12 rolling metal doors of FIND Inc., a food bank in Cathedral City.

In a room off the main office sits a long white table laden with food donated by local manufacturers and grocers. There are graham crackers and bags of instant hot chocolate and cereal. Nearby, bottles and cans from the USDA are stacked high with more nutritious foods, including canned beef, unsweetened applesauce and evaporated skim milk. The place



"It's no longer a matter of pride when you're hungry and out of food," recipient Greg Morin says as tears well up in his eyes.

overflows with food. In fact, FIND, like many food banks across the country in need of more space, will soon move to a larger warehouse.

"Everybody assumes people are hungry because there's not enough food to go around. That's not true," said David Paradine, president and CEO of FIND.

He said he would like to distribute more produce, but fresh fruits and vegetables are hard to store with his limited refrigeration space.

"You can't keep and sit on it like a can of tomato sauce or a jar of peanut butter," he said.

About 25 percent of the food moved by America's Second Harvest is produce, an increase over the past five years, though that ratio varies regionally.

Many food-bank operators said they want to move more produce, but they echoed Paradine's tales of crates of liquefied plums and tomatoes. FIND and other banks accelerate distribution with mobile pantries, refrigerated trucks that take free food into low-income areas, farmer's market-style.

Still, the Inland Second Harvest Food Bank's Brock said he'll take whatever is offered. He said he feels uncomfortable telling manufacturers such as

Nestlé, Kraft Foods Inc., General Mills Inc. or ConAgra Foods, "I'll take your peanut-butter products, but I won't take your high-salt, nonnutritional dips for chips."

If giving to food banks becomes inconvenient, donors may turn elsewhere, Brock said.

"You run a very fine line when you're doing that because you may alienate potential donors of other products," he said.

Jack Brown, chairman and CEO of Stater Bros., which has donated 44 million pounds of food, mostly bread and pastries, to local banks since 1988, agreed.

"As far as trying to select things that are on a diet, that's asking way too much of a donor," he said. "Now, there may be organizations that come to the food bank and say, 'You know, we prefer water instead of soda pop,' and I'm sure they're able to get it."

Representatives of Kraft, General Mills and Kellogg Co. declined to address whether the companies would be less likely to give if food-aid organizations begin to refuse certain foods.

"All of our products are considered desirable," said Heidi Geller, spokeswoman for General Mills.

Dr. Wayne McKinny, a retired

pediatrician, feeds 1,700 poor and homeless people each week at The Well in the Desert, a nonprofit he founded in Palm Springs. McKinny applauds Paradine's efforts to increase the amount of nutritious food at FIND, one of the places he gets food for his clients. Still, there are days when he leaves frustrated.

"The thing that drives me to the wall is that they do not have real food," he said. "They've got tons of crackers and cookies and candies."

LONG-TERM HUNGER

During a recent tour of his Second Harvest Food Bank facility in Riverside, Brock pointed to a package of French fries and acknowledged that some of the food distributed is of questionable nutritional value.

"But we're trying to give the agencies as much and as great a variety as possible," he said.

Besides, food banks give out only supplemental food, and "when you're in crisis mode, nutrition is going to take a back seat," Brock said. People in urgent need should deal with nutrition "maybe sometime later, when they're back on their feet," he said.

Increasingly, though, banks don't just serve people in emergencies. Many who live with food insecurity now rely on food banks to get through every month.

The end of the month is particularly hard for Regina L. Valdivia, 35, of San Bernardino, a single mother who does housekeeping through a temp agency. Her food stamps don't kick in until the ninth of each month.

"I have a 4-year-old son, and he has to eat," Valdivia said recently at the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County Food Bank after receiving a bag of food. "They're giving it to me, so I'm not going to be picky about it."

The emergency food network has become the first line of defense for some people, said Prendergast, the Second Harvest nutrition manager.

"We're seeing people for months and months at a time, or years and years at a time, which means we're going to take more of a health approach because they're coming to us for two weeks out of the month for their health needs," she said.

Each bank must make its own decision about whether to focus on nutrition, Prendergast said.

Locally, FIND is working to find a dairy to supply it with fresh milk regularly. Next year, Paradine said, he would like to hire a nutritionist and join the 25 percent to 35 percent of America's Second Harvest food banks with a diet expert on staff. The role of nutritionists varies by food bank, but often, they write educational pamphlets and teach nutrition to the other agencies that distribute the bulk of a bank's food.

For his part, Morin said he found his way to the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County Food Bank after a rough few years that involved a contentious divorce, heavy drug use and a stint in prison. He now lives with his 20-year-old son and said he's focusing on the short term, staying clean and eating regular meals of any food he is offered.

"Put it this way, I'm grateful for anything I get," Morin said. Reach Leah Messinger at 951-368-9460 or leamessinger@PE.com