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The Fine Art of Feeding the Hungry

YOU RUSH OUT THE DOOR of your local supermarket, laden with goodies for the holiday table, envisioning the feasts ahead. As you exit, you see a barrel next to the door, pleading for food. As a good citizen, knowing that the holidays are when people recognize the less fortunate, you throw in a few cans of tuna. Do you wonder what happens to your tuna, and whether it gets to the people who need it most?

The people who need it most are, quite simply, the hungry in America. These people are not just the homeless. The hungry are low-income children and adults, including the elderly, the working poor, the unemployed, the disabled, survivors of domestic abuse, recovering substance abusers, felons, and AIDS victims. They include families and, increasingly, the working poor, who have to stand in line at soup kitchens and visit food pantries. The food they receive often comes from their local food bank.

Here's how someone might get your can of tuna. A truck picks up the supermarket barrel and drives it to a food bank, which acts as a clearinghouse and warehouse for hunger-relief agencies. The food bank does not serve meals and does not distribute the food directly to hungry people. In the case of our food bank—the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB), located in the poorest county in the San Francisco Bay Area—three hundred agencies shop at our warehouse and hand out food to hungry people, mostly in bags of groceries. At the warehouse, volunteers sort and screen the food from the barrels, discarding items such as dented cans, packaged food past its expiration date, and opened boxes. Next, they head to the warehouse shelves to stock the food.

Three kinds of packaged food appear on the food bank's shelves. The items donated from barrels and food drives is considered the most desirable because of its quality. Individuals like us donate that food and are generous with bags of rice

and beans, soups, and jars of peanut butter and coffee. Even so, sometimes some pretty wacky stuff comes out of the barrels, and we take it all. Staff favorites have included

- Corn poppadums in mango chutney flavor, made in Dubai
- Jufran banana sauce from the Philippines
- Compote of prunes from Norway
- Salted duck eggs from Taiwan
- Meatless Nuteena peanut loaf with soy, corn, and rice, made in the USA
- Blood pudding with raisins, made in France
- Ukrainian mock caviar from Bulgaria
- Chocolate body paint, made in the USA.

Products from local food manufacturers, food brokers, producers, growers, and retailers who donate surplus constitute the second group of foods. Their products might be close to expiring, part of an overrun, less than perfect produce, new items that didn't make it, or regular products that didn't sell. For their charity, these companies get a tax donation. The third category of edibles on the warehouse shelf is the smallest: the wholesome foods the food bank purchases to round out the selection and increase availability of nutritious items.

Agency members come to the food bank to shop. Sometimes the food is free, but often they pay "shared maintenance," or twelve to eighteen cents per pound, to partially cover food bank expenses. When they return to their food pantries, residential programs, day programs, shelters, children's after-school programs, and soup kitchens, they pack the items in grocery bags to give away, or make hot meals, or distribute snacks.

Yet feeding the hungry goes far beyond grocery donations. The issues are complex, controversial, and political, and often take years to resolve. At the ACCFB, where I have been a board member for seven years, some challenges are typical

Left: John Jackson sorts food and other grocery items in the Food Bank's warehouse. He is one of hundreds of volunteers the Food Bank depends on to get the food onto warehouse shelves.

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of those facing the nation's food banks, such as keeping up with demand in this economy despite declining food donations. Additionally, the ACCFB desires to provide mostly nutritious food, and pledges not just to hand out food, but to change the system by examining and addressing the root causes of hunger and by educating the public.

Alameda County reaches along the East Bay from Albany to Fremont, and east as far as Livermore. Our food bank is located on the Oakland army base, in the former army commissary, a one-hundred-thousand-square-foot facility with no windows, and, until recently, no heat or air conditioning for our staff of around thirty people. The ACCFB distributes more than twelve million pounds of food per year, which means serving 120,000 people a month. Our annual budget is approximately 3.2 million dollars. While the food bank solicits from manufacturers, producers, retailers, and individual households, the majority of its edibles come from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and America's Second Harvest, the national organization to which most American food banks belong. In terms of funding, however, the biggest donors are individuals who live in the county, and the county government. Together, these two sources provide more than 50 percent of the food bank's income.

In the past few years, our food bank has been struggling to keep up. Last year, demand for food was up 50 percent, while donations from local purveyors of food were down 70 percent. So many people called the Food Bank's Hunger Hotline to find out where they could get food for the holidays that the phone lines jammed, and many could not get through.

Choosing Between Paying Rent and Buying Food

The San Francisco Bay Area is one of the most expensive places to live in the United States, and, as a result, close to half of the respondents polled in our food bank's 2002 Hunger Study said they often have to choose between eating and paying rent. Some can afford only popcorn by the end of the month; others feed their children but not themselves.

According to the 2000 California Budget Project, a single mother would have to earn \$44,172.00 to make ends meet. Two working parents would have to make \$53,736.00. At minimum wage, one person would have to work 150 hours per week to afford a two-bedroom apartment. Most of the more than four hundred people we interviewed in our 2000 Hunger Study earn less than the federal poverty line of \$15,492.00 per year for a family of three.

The Hunger Study revealed that, of the people our agencies serve, 43 percent are children up to age eighteen. At a Food Bank awards ceremony a few years ago, I sat at a

table with a Spanish teacher who started a food giveaway program at her elementary school in West Oakland because more than 80 percent of all the children there are hungry. Studies have shown that children who are hungry cannot learn, have a low birth weight, anemia, stunted growth, are underweight, and, ironically, may suffer from obesity. Together with another teacher, she hands out bags of groceries on Friday so that the children will have food to get their families through the weekend. It is still not enough. Parents sometimes come to her house on weekends to ask if she has any extra food, any more of anything.

Even in a country as rich as ours, we are unable to end hunger. Food banks do their best but cannot keep up. Our food bank's mission is to alleviate hunger by providing nutritious food and nutrition education to people in need, educating the public, and promoting public policies that address hunger and its root causes. Many food banks simply hand out food.

If Food Is Free, How Can We Get the Best Quality?

A food bank's model is to distribute to hungry people what comes in over the transom. The problem is that, by definition, food banks receive surplus. Shopping in the warehouse is not like a trip to Costco. Let's say you're a chef from the Berkeley Emergency Food and Housing Project who prepares dinner for 250 homeless people a day. You already know that you can't get all your ingredients from the Food Bank, because we don't permit it. So you go to the warehouse and see the usual preponderance of soda, candy, jam, and salad dressing. You might buy the better food we keep on hand. Many days there is no meat or fresh produce; another day, frozen salmon filets and oranges are plentiful.

The USDA's definition of nutritious foods includes whole grains and a variety of fruits and vegetables, foods with no more than 30 percent of calories from fat, and foods low in salt. These are difficult foods to acquire. The processed food we get is rarely whole-grain. While we struggle to get fresh produce, it has become a priority to provide more. In the past, we relied on donations, but gifts have drawbacks. Last summer I saw cases of ripe plums and apricots lined to the ceiling in our refrigerated area. They were donated because they were past their selling point. The fruit came in on a Thursday. We had only until the end of Friday to give it all away, and we couldn't do it. By Monday the fruit had rotted.

Despite these obstacles, the Food Bank strives for a majority of nutritious food, somewhere around 65 to 80 percent. Quality is so important that it is part of our mission.



We get to this high percentage in a few ways:

- We purchase items such as beef stew, tofu, and cereal to supplement what comes in as surplus. We must sell these foods to our agencies.
- Recently we have been working with local farmers to sell us produce at reduced prices, such as stone fruit and citrus.
- We sometimes turn away food that has no nutritional benefit, such as a truckload of marshmallows. This is a politically incorrect strategy, however, and does not endear us to our suppliers.
- We acquire nutritious food from the federal government. The USDA provides 34 percent of all food we receive. We get canned and dried fruit, nuts and legumes, frozen chicken parts, pasta and spaghetti sauce.

Agencies can distribute USDA food through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), which supplies groceries, and the Congregate Feeding Program (CFA), which supplies food for hot meals. To be eligible, agencies must have a strategic locale, adequate volunteers, adequate storage and refrigeration, and the capacity to distribute food to a large or underserved population, such as immigrants or refugees. They must also be willing to do paperwork, as the USDA requires monthly reports detailing which individuals are served. Only sixty of our three hundred agencies meet the specifications. Those sites distribute all of the USDA food in the county.

Every day, families in need sit down to a hot lunch at Oakland's St. Vincent de Paul Free Dining Room, one of the Food Bank's member agencies.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID BACON ©2003

While the food bank would love to purchase only the best-quality food for its agencies, we can't afford to. Last year we spent \$150,000.00 buying food, a drop in the bucket of our 3.2 million dollar budget.

Is Quality Relevant When You're Hungry?

Last year, we took in 700,000 pounds of soda. I decided to research the implications for our clients and found that according to a 1998 report by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, teens drink nearly twice as much soda as milk, whereas twenty years ago they drank nearly twice as much milk as soda.

The report also showed that for each additional daily serving of a soda, the incidence of obesity increased significantly. The number of severely overweight children in the United States has doubled since 1980. Drinking soda every day can make children more prone to obesity, bone fractures, cavities, and Type 2 diabetes, say health experts.

In 2001 the Oakland Unified School District became the first in the nation to ban soda on school grounds, even



though company contracts for vending machines alone brought in an estimated \$200,000.00 per year for the schools, which are currently bankrupt. A year later, the Los Angeles School District followed suit. The same year, the Oakland School District hired the state's first school nurse to deal with diabetes associated with childhood obesity. "We are seeing younger and younger kids coming to school with blood sugar monitoring machines, and health issues come up in class," said nurse Joe Solowiejczyk in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Certain groups, such as African-Americans, Latinos, and poor Whites, are at higher risk of getting the disease, creating a pressing problem for the Oakland schools, because 75 percent of the district's fifty-two thousand students are African-American or Latino.

Last summer, while I was board president, I sent out a stack of news stories and statistics with the monthly board package, determined to start a dialogue based on this information. At the board meeting, I stated my case. Since the food bank's mission is to give the hungry nutritious food, I reasoned, should we be concerned about the amount of soda we give out? The subject immediately became touchy. Some board members thought it would be paternalistic to tell hungry people we weren't giving them soda anymore. Who were we to restrict any food, particularly junk food, which we eat as well? Any food was better than no food. It contained calories, and calories are fuel. Besides, if we didn't give it to

Vivian Hain (center) and her nine-year-old daughter Jasmine (right) regularly speak out on hunger issues on behalf of the Food Bank. Earlier this year, Jasmine traveled to a press conference in Washington, D.C., where she spoke about the importance of school meal programs.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID BACON @2003

them they would just go out and buy it, and therefore use money that could have been used for something more important, like bus fare or laundry. And in poor neighborhoods prices are higher, so they would end up paying more.

I argued that since the food bank only provides an average of three meals a week to people, we should give them the most nutritious food possible, and it was up to us to decide what to stock, given our limited resources. I asked what would happen if we turned away the soda. Board members voiced concern that there would be retribution: we might be cut off from other higher-quality food donations from the same company, or company officials would be angry because they weren't getting a tax write-off.

In the end, I didn't ask for a vote, because I didn't think it was up to the board to decide which specific foods the food bank should carry. When Suzan Bateson, the Executive Director, broached the soda issue to the staff, they were equally divided, and even the nutritionist was torn. But slowly, the food bank is moving towards educating our agencies about the risks. After the discussion, the nutritionist

posted a sign next to the cases in the warehouse, cautioning that soda was unhealthy. She also set up a display showing sixteen pounds of sugar that explained how one soda per day leads to this amount of sugar consumption in six months. Ironically, this year, we received less soda. It's simply because in this economy, companies are donating less.

Last May, the California State Senate discussed a new bill, SB677, which would restrict the sale of sugar-laden soft drinks on public school campuses throughout the state. It passed and went on to the State Assembly for approval.

What Should Hungry People Eat?

Should hungry people eat whatever free food they are given? Like all complicated questions, the answer is yes and no. On the one hand, yes, hungry people have fewer choices, and when they are starving, they probably eat what they are given. This is particularly true when soup kitchens serve a hot meal. There is only what appears on the plate. On the other hand, hungry people are like everyone else. They have their preferences. They can be picky eaters just like us, or ignorant about certain foods, or they might eat only culturally appropriate food.

In Emeryville, I visited the Emeryville Community Action Program (ECAP), a non-profit that hands out free food every day around lunchtime, from behind a table, to whoever is willing to stand in line. Initially, I was appalled by the amount of sugary drinks and sweet baked goods handed out that day. I discovered later that many junkies live in the area, and sugar is what they crave. So in this case, sugary foods are culturally appropriate, but certainly not nutritious. Sometimes ECAP gets fresh produce, and people take whatever they want from cardboard boxes on display. I saw an elderly African-American man hold up a button mushroom and ask, "What do I do with this?" He was halfway through the line, and a box of artichokes sat next to the mushrooms, almost untouched. I was incredulous, and again, also ignorant. Would the man have had a problem figuring out what to do with greens, peas, or corn? Probably not. These foods would have been more culturally appropriate for him.

Inside ECAP, a woman came for her appointment to pick up USDA food, for which she was eligible. She stacked her cart with frozen meat, pasta, canned fruits and vegetables, and nuts. The people in the line outside didn't know about the food inside, let alone how to apply for it, or whether they were eligible.

Board member Cleveland Thomas runs The Good Samaritan Home in downtown Oakland. Every Friday

morning, starting at 10 A.M., his volunteers hand out up to five hundred bags of food to those who line up along the sidewalk from as early as 5 A.M. Should his agency hand out free yogurt and bread in a neighborhood of predominantly Asian immigrants? Yes, he explains, because the children of those immigrants have already assimilated and want those foods. Cleveland is particularly proud of the fresh produce he supplies to his Asian clientele. But sometimes people take the food because it is free, he says, and then a block away, dump it along the street and sidewalk.

Teaching a Man To Fish

You know that old chestnut: give a man a fish, and he has food for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he will never go hungry. Our food bank believes that it is not enough simply to hand out food, even though it is integral to our main mission. We also need to change the system by making it more just for hungry people. Our full-time Director of Advocacy, Education and Outreach, Jessica Bartholow, addresses government programs that discriminate against the hungry, and helps educate the working poor about their rights to food. Each May, on Hunger Action day, she takes a busload of agency members and clients to the state capital in Sacramento to meet with legislators and get support to overturn laws that discriminate against the hungry. She provides media training so that clients can meet directly with legislators and say, in their own words and often with eloquence, how hard it is to get nutritious food on a regular basis. One of the Food Bank's core beliefs is that the hungry should speak for themselves, rather than have us always speak on their behalf.

This year the group asked for support for AB231: Save Money, Cut Hunger Act. Assembly member Darrell Steinberg authored legislation that would save 10 million dollars by ending a statewide fingerprinting system for people who apply for food stamps. A recent audit found that the program's effectiveness could not be proven, as researchers could find only forty-five cases of fraud over two years. It also confirmed concerns that fingerprinting provokes fear among immigrants and counters efforts to increase food stamp participation.

During our visit, some of our clients spoke out against a system that makes them feel like criminals for applying for food. They said the process was so difficult and time-consuming that it's not worthwhile to apply. A former felon and drug addict described how hard it was to feed her children because she is not eligible for food stamps and has no job. And, saddest of all, a mother of three told a legislator

that her husband had been arrested for stealing ten dollars' worth of food from a Berkeley grocery store, and was sentenced to six weekends in jail because they could not pay the \$350.00 fine.

Even with its problems, food stamps are our country's first line of defense against hunger. The food stamp program has done more to end hunger in America than any other program and currently serves almost twenty million low-income people, over half of whom are children. In California, participation in the food stamp program has dropped by 45 percent since 1995, partially because families are losing their food stamp benefits when they leave CalWorks, a government support program. Less than half of those Californians eligible to participate in the program receive food stamps, leaving the state with the second lowest participation rate in the nation, and leaving eighty to one hundred million dollars in federal aid on the table.

In Alameda County, only 21 percent of households we interviewed for the 2000 Hunger Study said they receive food stamps. Ironically, an estimated 80 percent qualified for them. Even those who receive food stamps said the food lasts just over two weeks, instead of a month. The amount of food stamps people receive depends on their income and assets. A family of four could receive a maximum of \$452.00 per month in food stamps if they owned nothing and had no savings. They wouldn't have to sell their car to qualify if it were worth less than \$4,690.00, a value raised by only \$150.00 since the rule was established in 1977. But people often get much less. My friend Artensia Barry, who lives in public housing in Berkeley, qualifies for only \$10.00 per month in food stamps because she receives a \$750.00 per month disability check, her sole income. She sometimes turns to a local food pantry for assistance. Seniors also qualify for a maximum of \$10.00 per month in food stamps, regardless of their situation.

Our food bank's work with food stamps is ongoing, and growing. We educate our agencies about how to get clients signed up. A few years ago, we worked with Senator Martha Escutia on a provision to shorten and simplify the thirteen-page food stamp application. Today it is only five pages. While in Sacramento last spring, we also asked the Governor to reconsider his decision to cut the California Senior Brown Bag program, Measure AB41, which donates food to approximately forty thousand low-income seniors at more than six hundred community sites. The annual cost to the state is \$850,000.00. The food bank interviewed 137 Alameda County seniors participating in the brown bag program and found that 77 percent had a total household income of under \$1,000.00 per month. Most said that often

the food they bought did not last through the month, and they did not have enough money to buy more. The California Senate and Assembly since voted to spare the bill, but the Governor still wants to cut it. They have yet to come to agreement.

With our country's rising government deficits, federal money is at risk for the National School Lunch Program, the Summer Lunch Program, and the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program. For the first time since 1998, our national leaders sat down this year to review these programs and make adjustments in their budgets and regulations. Their decisions are still pending.

What needs to be done? In food circles we have the resources and knowledge to help others gain access to the food we take for granted. Food banks need volunteers to educate others about healthy eating, food preparation, nutrition, and food safety. Americans, particularly politicians, need to know that people go hungry in this country, particularly children. Speaking out to demand better food policy can influence their thinking. And the least that each of us can do during this holiday season is place a generous bag of healthy and nutritious foods, such as tuna, soup, beans, rice, peanut butter, dried fruit, canned meat and vegetables, into that supermarket barrel. Or donate to the local food bank. 🍷

NOTES

For more information on food banks, see www.acfb.org or www.secondharvest.org/. The California legislature just passed the final budget and funded the Brown Bag Program for seniors. Unfortunately, the budget did not eliminate either the fingerprinting requirement for food stamp applicants or the auto resource limit. For the status of California bills discussed in this article, go to www.leginfo.ca.gov/bilinfo.html. For federal decisions that affect the hungry, go to the Food Research and Action Center at www.frac.org.