

Drop in donations prompts campaign

One firm's president gets creative to raise supplies for food bank

Nicole Tomlinson

Vancouver Sun

Thursday, August 07, 2008

VANCOUVER - Donations to the Greater Vancouver Food Bank have plummeted. Not only has the organization received 19 per cent less food than at the same time last year, but cash donations are down by 33 per cent, food bank spokeswoman Arlene Kravitz said.

"Our goal was to raise \$250,000 in cash donations this summer. We're only at \$147,000 and it's August," Kravitz said.

"With the high cost of gas and food, people are struggling. ... Demand is up and supply is down."

However, at least one company is pitching in to boost food donations.

Mike McKee, president of junk-collection company 1-800 RID-OF-IT, said he'd heard "through the grapevine" that food banks across the Metro Vancouver were facing a crunch, so he decided to lend a fleet.

Tonight and Friday evening, company drivers will pick up non-perishable food from homes in Vancouver and the North Shore.

"All people have to do is call us and we'll come," McKee said.

The company's campaign -- dubbed "Christmas in August" to encourage people to give like they do in the holiday season -- McKee's drivers are also parking their trucks around the city, playing holiday songs and waving signs to grab the public's attention.

"During this time people are stretched to the limit," McKee said.

Kravitz said summer is one of the toughest times of the year for struggling families because they have to put more food on the table, since their kids aren't getting fed through meal programs at school.



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Employees of 1-800 RID-OF-IT Thomas Cousins (left) and Peter Martin cheer on top of the truck while below Wendy Miley (left), Mike McKee and Kim Martin flog campaign banners for the food bank drive.

About 41 per cent of the up to 25,000 people the Greater Vancouver Food Bank feeds each week are children, she said.

James Brander, a University of B.C. commerce professor, said the drop in donations isn't surprising considering the current economic climate.

"Over the past year, housing prices have flattened and food and gas prices are going up," Brander said. "These are indications that the economy has definitely slowed relative to last year. ... People are being more cautious about their dollars."

But, he added, the economic change hasn't been drastic enough to account for plummeting food bank donations.

"We could expect a five-, 10-per-cent drop, but I wouldn't have thought it was nearly enough to cause that much of a decline," he said. "It might be related to specific public relation issues ... changes in distribution or community contact."

But Kravitz said the food bank hasn't significantly changed the way it operates in the last year.

"We run very lean with only 25 full-time staff ... and there are 10 million cans of food going out of our warehouse over the course of a year," she said. "We never know why donations are down."

Regardless of the reason, McKee said 1-800 RID-OF-IT is eager to get donation numbers back up. "If we can help out our customers and we can help out the food bank, the effort is well worth it," he said.

Five trucks will be picking up food between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. today and Friday. The company's goal is to collect 1,000 items, McKee said.

ntomlinson@vancouver.sun.com

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