

Hard-hit food bank gets emergency grant

Residents urged to donate as well

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

The Poor and Needy Division of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust has awarded a grant of \$150,000 in emergency funding to the Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina.

The food bank had nearly empty shelves in recent months, making it impossible to provide food to partner agencies that feed more than 50,000 people.

The grant will be used to obtain and supply 300,000 pounds of nutritious food to help meet the growing need for food assistance in Forsyth County during fiscal year 2009-2010. The food will be provided by Second Harvest Food Bank to emergency assistance agencies in Forsyth County.

The grant is the first awarded by a collaborative of three local funders, which was created last year in response to conditions caused by the economic downturn. Officials from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust's Poor and Needy Division, The Winston-Salem Foundation and United Way of Forsyth County have been meeting regularly with local nonprofits to plan for addressing emergency needs of the community.

For the next year, we at the Trust - along with our counterparts at The Winston-Salem Foundation and the United Way - want to support agencies

in providing a safety net for residents who are struggling," said Karen McNeil-Miller, president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.



McNeil-Miller



Fitzgerald

Winston-Salem Foundation President Scott Wierman added that "the food assistance grant made by the Trust is the collaborative's first emergency intervention. When additional assistance is required, either United Way or The Winston-Salem Foundation will contribute the funding."

Food assistance needs in the county have increased 75 percent over last year, and the high level of demand is projected to continue throughout the current fiscal year, which began July 1, 2009.

"To meet this level of need, Forsyth County must have at least four million pounds of nutritious food over the next 12 months. Even with the programs we have in place, we anticipate a gap of about 500,000 pounds of food over the course of the year," said Clyde Fitzgerald, Second Harvest executive director. "We very much appreciate the grant from the Trust, which hopefully will enable us to meet food requests in the county through December."

Several groups and organizations are holding food drives for Second Harvest. Residents are urged to support these efforts by donating non-perishable food items.

OFA

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hand to share their ideas and suggestions.

"The president is asking us to develop Organizing for America so that that is your channel to the White House," Siler told the audience.

The implementation of OFA could not come soon enough for President Obama. Public opinion polls suggests that he is losing public support for his health plan. A NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll released last week showed that only 36 percent of Americans thought that Obama's plan was a good idea, versus 42 percent who thought it wasn't. Obama's overall approval rating has also dropped to 53 percent. OFA is hoping to change that.

"Right now I think this issue of health care is a hot topic. It's somewhat complicated. People don't know what it means for them," said Siler. "Organizing for America is here to help them have a voice in this conversation."

The crowd at Emmanuel needed no persuasion. They all are diehard supporters of the president. But many expressed concern that slipping support of the Obama plan may mean that if a healthcare bill does make its way through Congress, it will be greatly stripped down.

There is already word that the controversial "public option" may be headed for the chopping block. Obama is proposing a public health care option, or government health insurance, as a way to cover the uninsured and drive down costs by competing with insurance companies.



Pecolia Breathette reads off some suggestions for OFA.

Pecolia Breathette said she feared that the Obama proposal will be picked apart to the point where it will not provide coverage to the unemployed and those who can't afford to pay for any insurance plan - public or private.

"I know people who are sick and need it," said Breathette. "They need to go to the doctor, but they can't go."

Breathette has already advocated for healthcare reform by collecting signatures on petitions that she has sent to members of Congress. She plans to continue her advocacy with OFA.

Siler said OFA has many plans to promote Obama's healthcare plan by starting phone banks, staging public awareness events and conducting door-to-door canvassing. OFA also plans for a Web site with information to contradict the many misconceptions and attacks being circulated about Obama's plan.

Just before the event, the Forsyth County Democratic Party heard from several candidates running for City Council this year. Council Member Dan Besse told the audience he felt OFA could make a difference.

"The critical thing ... is that our representatives in Congress, particularly the Democrats in Congress who are a majority ... need to hear from us, each of us, about what is important to us," said Besse.

Siler said she has seen overwhelming support for healthcare reform as she has toured the state.

"I think the number one concern is that it's not going to happen soon enough," said Siler. "People want to see healthcare reform, and they want to it now."

For information about Organizing for America visit www.mybarackobama.com.

STIs

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said Patrice Toney, the Health Department of Forsyth County's HIV/STI Supervisor. The county uses the term STI (or sexually transmitted infection) as opposed to the more common STD (sexually transmitted disease) because officials say it has less of a stigma.

Since January, the county has identified 100 new cases of syphilis, compared to only 27 cases that were identified at the same time a year ago. Furthermore, local health officials believe that about 30 percent of local residents have been infected by syphilis and don't even know it.

The Health Department is preparing to do serious battle with syphilis, which is transmitted through direct contact with syphilis sores that mainly grow on the external genitals, vagina, anus, in the rectum and sometimes on the lips and in the mouth. Saturday, the Health Department's P.O.S.S.E. (Prevent Ongoing Spread of STIs Everywhere) team used the NBTF as the backdrop for a light-hearted event that preached the importance of STI testing and prevention.

Dozens attended the free program at the Arts Council Theatre, where they were fed like royalty and entertained with music and a skit written and performed by Annie Hamlin Johnson - the mother of NBTF Founder Larry Leon Hamlin. Several lucky atten-

dees took home tickets to "In the Continuum" and "Hope: Living and Lying with HIV in Jamaica," both of which are NBTF productions that tackle the issue of STIs.

"The theater has always been a venue to address societal issues," said Toney, a longtime NBTF volunteer and supporter.

Toney and her P.O.S.S.E. team will stage a production of sorts of their own later this month. They will have dozens of costars - health experts from across the state and Southeast. Together, they will go door-to-door in many Forsyth County communities offering residents free HIV and syphilis tests. It's called a R.I.O.T. (Rapid Intervention Outreach Team), and for two days, Aug. 28 and Aug. 29, it's main mission will be to try to curb Forsyth County's mounting STI rate.

"We have to go to where the people are. We can't always rely on them coming to us," said P.O.S.S.E. team member Tania Strickland, the county's HIV Non-Traditional Sites coordinator.

The county is already very actively fighting STIs, which makes the rising numbers even more puzzling. Health officials conduct testing and educational forums at churches, community events, inside the local jail and prison, and the P.O.S.S.E. team includes two bilingual members who work almost exclusively with the Spanish-speaking population. But, team members say, each testing event and educa-



Photo by Kevin Walker

P.O.S.S.E. team members (from left) Jennifer Nall, Regina Allen, Tania Strickland and Rossy Marroquin.

tional session reveals that there is still much work to be done to make local people fully aware of how to protect themselves from STIs.

Rossy Marroquin, a twenty-something AmeriCorps volunteer who works with P.O.S.S.E., said she has found that often parents don't have enough information to adequately protect themselves or equip their children.

"I'm surprised that even though they are older than me, they don't know what STIs are," Marroquin said of some of the women in the workshops she conducts.

Syphilis is very treatable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, often a single injection of penicillin can cure a recently-infected person. But without treatment,

syphilis can wreak havoc on the body - causing damage to internal organs, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness

and dementia.

Toney calls it a "silent killer" because the symptoms are so subtle that they are

often mistaken for other, more minor ailments. The first sign that most have that something is wrong is a single or multiple sore(s) (called a chancre), which will heal on its own after a month or so. Later, a skin rash or lesions develop (they often appear as spots on the palms of hands or soles of the feet).

The correct and consistent use of a condom can greatly reduce the chance of being infected, however; a syphilis sore can sprout in areas that are not covered or protected by a latex condom.

Anyone who thinks that they may be infected should seek treatment immediately. The Health Department offers free testing, counseling and referral services. Call 336-703-3212 or 336-703-3213 to ask a trained professional any questions that you may have.

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