



Helping families get 'over the hump'

Douglas County church fights food insecurity with free grocery 'store'

By Tom Skelley

tskelley@coloradocommunitymedia.com

Many Douglas County residents don't realize some of the people closest to them are skipping meals or choosing between paying for medicine, rent or food.

Robert Peterson wants them to know that hunger and food insecurity are very

real problems, and that he and others are there to help.

"The biggest thing is recognizing the

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Groceries

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need in Douglas County. Most of us in Highlands Ranch don't realize our neighbors are going hungry," Peterson said.

As pastor of outreach for Valley View Christian Church, Peterson oversees Valley View Cares, a free grocery "store" inside the church that operates every Friday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Since May 20, the church near the intersection of Santa Fe Drive and Titan Parkway has been inviting people to take a grocery cart and peruse the store's shelves, taking what they need to provide nutritious, satisfying meals for their families. The program is open to everyone, not only residents of Douglas County. Clients have come from Littleton, Aurora, Elbert County and other areas.

Peterson acknowledges that residents of Douglas County — which has a median household income of about \$103,000 — have a high standard of living and most

don't have to worry about hunger. But he also knows they aren't invulnerable.

"Life happens," he said. "You have no idea what someone is going through... A death in the family, someone's lost their job... We want to help those families get over the hump. This gives them the margin to pay their rent, pay for medicine."

Statistics on food insecurity back up Peterson's statement.

Numbers from the hunger relief non-profit Feeding America show that 27,780 people in Douglas County, or 9.3 percent of residents, faced food insecurity in 2014. Douglas County doesn't have any food banks west of Highlands Ranch, Peterson says, indicating the need for Valley View Cares' services.

"They're surprised at the amount they can take, they're surprised they can choose their own stuff," Peterson said of people who come to Valley View Cares for the first time. "The biggest thing is getting items they know they'll use rather than just a box of food they may or may not

want."

Food for the store's shelves comes from the Food Bank of the Rockies and Southeast Community Outreach in Parker, and church food drives and donations from local groceries supplement the store's supply.

Church members help clients complete an intake interview, taking into account family size and financial factors such as income, credit card and mortgage payments, and other variables. A separate team within the church devises a financial plan to create a budget and help clients improve their situation while they receive food from Valley View Cares. Most "customers" visit the store twice a month.

Responsible for "keeping all of this beautiful" is market manager Gala Compton. She makes the trip to Southeast Community Outreach each week to select and transport the food back to Valley View Cares. Compton says she relishes giving clients more than just food.

“We want this to be a pleasant experience,” she said. “People just need to be spoiled. I’d like them to feel a little spoiled, but in a good way — spoiled with love.”

Making the experience inviting is important, Peterson said, because he wants clients to come back. More than that, he wants them to spread the word to other families who may need the help.

Compton and Peterson want Valley View Cares to expand their services to as many people as possible. More than 20

families currently use the program, but Peterson says they have the resources to help many more. He says the store presently can serve up to 100 families and would be able to increase resources to serve even more.

To some it may appear Valley View Cares is helping people who don’t need it as much as people living on the street or in a shelter. The program has no minimum or maximum income for participants, and most of the program’s clients drive themselves to the church, sometimes in expensive vehicles.

The interview process and ongoing financial assessments weed out the disingenuous, Peterson says, and he adds that he doesn’t worry about scammers as much as he worries about people who need the help but are too proud to use it.

“There are those people who will try to take advantage, but I’d rather err on the side of generosity than on the side of judging people,” he said. “I think (the problem) is the opposite. My heart breaks for the people who are afraid to walk through that door.”

HUNGER IN DOUGLAS COUNTY

According to Feeding America, food insecurity is a problem almost 28,000 Douglas County residents and 1 in 7 Americans face.

Food Insecurity

The USDA defines it as a state in which “consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources... A household is food insecure if, in the previous year, they experienced limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods.”

Characteristics of food insecurity include:

- Worrying that your family will run out of food
- Not being able to afford healthy food or cook balanced meals

- Eating but being hungry at the end of the meal
- Eating only one or two meals a day
- Going an entire day without eating, sometimes more than once a week
- Not knowing how or if you will be able to afford food

Percentage of residents facing food insecurity

Colorado: 12.9 percent

Douglas County: 9.3 percent (Feeding America)

Money on the table

In Douglas County:

- 5,572 residents are enrolled in food assistance programs. This represents only 38 percent of those who are eligible. (Feeding America)
- \$14.9 million in lost grocery sales. (Hunger Free Colorado)

Lost grocery sales are the total amount of dollars that could have been spent if all eligible residents utilized food assistance benefits. Ellie Agar of Hunger Free Colorado says the statistic also represents money that would have gone into local economies, providing more revenue and jobs for food retailers.