

COAST

September 2009

WHEN THE PANTRY IS EMPTY

“The need for donations has just skyrocketed – it’s grown 302% from the same time last year.”

Jim Palmer of the Orange County Rescue Mission has worked with needy people since he was 14 years old. Now, 31 years later, the president of the Orange County Rescue Mission is stunned by the growing number of needy people he sees on a daily basis. “Nobody has ever seen anything that comes close,” he says. “The need has just skyrocketed – it’s grown 302% from the same time last year. It’s very scary for people. There are so many new homeless. People say, ‘I used to be the one who brought food every month, and now, here I am.’”

Throughout Orange County, the story is the same. Donations are down, or flat from last year. But every month, more and more people are asking for help. “Food is where we’re seeing the biggest demand increase,” says Elizabeth Evans, marketing and communications manager for Share Our Selves in Costa Mesa. “Families have lost jobs, they are balancing expenses. Do you get donated food so you can pay the gas bill? Those are tough decisions.”

Share Our Selves used to give 185 bags of food each day – now they give 300. Donations have decreased, as they usually do in summer months, in

spite of more than 42,000 pounds of food donated through the Orange County Fair food drives.

Food donations are always needed, Evans says. But hygiene items like toothbrushes, or baby items like diapers or wipes, are also desperately needed. “As quick as we get those in, they go right back out,” she says.

The ongoing recession caused a drop in donations that has nearly caused Someone Cares Soup Kitchen to shut its doors after 23 years, Executive Director Shannon Santos says. “We’re hopeful we won’t have to trim services,” Santos says. “But need has spiked so dramatically, and donations are down dramatically.”

At Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, the number of people seeking help has increased from 30%-40% from last summer, says Audra Aucoin, a development supervisor and grant writer. And donations, again, are down. In 2005, she says, they collected 10.7 million pounds of dry “shelf-stable” food; this year, they expect to collect 8.6 million pounds.

Agencies are accepting donations – cash, diapers, food, school supplies, and more. Call or visit their Web sites to learn more about how you can help.

Someone Cares Soup Kitchen, (949) 548-8861, someonecareskitchen.org; Orange County Rescue Mission, (714) 247-4300, rescuemission.org; Share Our Selves, (949) 642-3451, shareourselves.org; Second Harvest Food Bank, (949) 653-2900, feedoc.org -AMY SENK