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Planned Pittsburg dining hall looks to feed need in East Contra Costa

By Paul Burgarino
Contra Costa Times

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PITTSBURG

Sergio Palaganas had no idea what to expect earlier this year when he started distributing food to the needy at Church of the Good Shepherd.

"We thought there would be maybe 20 to 25 people," Palaganas said.

However, word spread quickly about the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Contra Costa's bimonthly distribution of fresh produce, meats and other food items, and close to 80 needy families picked up food at the church on April 3.

"It really just ballooned. Every week it seems like it's growing by 10 to 15 families. I didn't expect to see this kind of need," said Palaganas, a Pittsburg resident and St. Vincent de Paul board member.

A similar food-distribution site by St. Vincent de Paul at St. Mark's Catholic Church in Richmond took nine years to generate as many clients, officials said. That site serves 80 to 120 families each week.

The number of people in need of hot meals and other social services has spiked throughout Contra

Costa County.

"There is a definite need, and it's growing every day," said Ron Weston, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul of Contra Costa.

Last week, St. Vincent de Paul broke ground on a 2,000-square-foot dining room inside its existing Pittsburg warehouse that officials hope will serve 150 people each day. The free hot meal program at the 2210 Gladstone Drive location will be run by nonprofit agency Loaves and Fishes of Contra Costa, which signed a 15-year contract with St. Vincent de Paul. Anyone can go to the site and receive a meal.

St. Vincent de Paul also is looking to launch a free medical clinic at the site. Both are expected to open in July.

The idea behind the clinic is to "address the gap" that those without insurance, or undocumented residents, encounter in the health care system, Weston said. Anybody can walk in and receive a checkup, he said.

Michael Baroman-Coggins, executive director of Loaves and Fishes, said the agency has seen a significant increase in meals served on most days and close to double toward the end of the month, when personal savings tend to run out.

"Most of what we're seeing is families coming in with children; families with providers who recently lost their jobs or people who have been out of work for some time, or elderly on fixed incomes. It's a way for them to get by without spending much," he said.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano reported

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a 64 percent increase in demand for services in 2009 compared with 2006, with about 130,000 people receiving assistance each month.

The greatest need is found in high-poverty areas, namely the western and eastern ends of the county and Concord's Monument corridor, said county Supervisor Federal Glover. According to a March study by the Food Bank, 71 percent of households that use the Food Bank have incomes below the federal poverty level.

During the economic downturn, more emergency food pantries have opened to help people make ends meet, particularly in Antioch and Pittsburg, said Lisa Sherill, the Food Bank's community relations manager. Meals served at pantries in East Contra Costa jumped 56 percent in the first nine months of 2009 compared with the same period in 2008.

The county's food resource directory lists 21 food pantries and nine soup kitchens in East Contra Costa and 14 and nine, respectively, in West County.

The growth in emergency pantries notwithstanding, East County lacks the established programs serving the local poor that are found in the western and central parts of the county, officials said.

"There's starting to be recognition that more is needed out in this area," said Willie Moffett, operations manager at St. Vincent de Paul Society's Pittsburg and Pleasant Hill thrift store sites.

Moffett points out that over the past decade or so, many moved east from Richmond, Oakland and San Francisco. With the economic downturn and people losing their homes to foreclosure, many have been left with no money and nowhere to go.

Faith-based groups throughout the region will play an important role as the county's continued budget cuts hamper its ability to provide social services, Glover said.

St. Vincent de Paul has several food-distribution sites throughout the county like the ones in Pittsburg and Richmond.

Loaves and Fishes works with St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Oakley, Community Baptist Church in Bay Point and Antioch's Crosspointe Family Church.

The group is looking to create a second Antioch site as well as a partnership with St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Brentwood to meet increased demand, Baroman-Coggins said.

The church has enough space for a soup kitchen, said the Rev. Aristotle Rivera of St. Alban's. The hope is to start serving meals in September after launching the Pittsburg dining hall.

"We know there's no soup kitchen out here (in Brentwood), and every day the need grows. There are people out here who can't pay their mortgage, go without food and need a place of community," he said.

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Lane Hartwell/staff
Food distribution programs in Contra Costa County are serving more needy families. Above, Maria Sadano, of Richmond, gets help from volunteer Oscar Ruiz at St. Mark's Catholic Church in

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