

Empress Hotel food giveaway a model for healthier eating in SROs

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oversees 18 supportive housing pantries in the Tenderloin and 50 in all, including SoMa. Almost half of the TL's 36,000 population "live with the daily threat of hunger," according to a 2007 Food Bank survey. In such a frail population, hunger worsens chronic health problems and speeds the onset of disease.

"The Empress has good food and it's beautiful and dignified — set up in a farmers' market style," says Sverdlov. "There are some other programs that are close to it, but it's the best and my model."

At less than half of Sverdlov's pantry drops shoppers help specify the items, something she wants to change. Selections made at the warehouse based on residents' requests avoid the waste when pantries contain only whatever items the Food Bank has on hand.

"I'm assessing the Tenderloin's needs now," Sverdlov says. "and I want to add three to five pantries. But we're only opening pantries that will shop."

EACH week, Empress Hotel General Manager Roberta Goodman takes the T-line to Third Street, gets off and walks a few blocks to the Food Bank. It's the poor man's Costco, a sprawling warehouse with a 60-foot ceiling at 900 Pennsylvania Ave. in Dogpatch, hard by Interstate 280.

She grabs a flatbed cart for her typical Wednesday morning shopping spree and wheels it sharply to the left, down an uncrowded corridor, past stacks of boxed and canned food to the bread bin on the east wall. But at 9:45 a.m. she's running a little late and the bin is practically empty.

"Luck of the draw," Goodman says, arching an eyebrow and selecting a dozen loaves while eyeing the pita bread. "But it's always an adventure here."

"Some people want the white bread," she adds, "but pita is always popular. Maybe more bread will show up before we leave."

"I pick a combination of healthy (foods) and what people like. I have one person who can't do any soy, and just about everything has it. Some are lactose intolerant and I'm careful about sugar for the diabetics."

Ever since she and resident Robert Abate collaborated on the Empress' food giveaway a year ago, Goodman has spent an hour each week shopping at the Food Bank. Part of her mission is to get the hotel's 82 formerly homeless folks up and running and leading active lives. She works for Delivering Innovation in Supportive Housing (DISH), under contract



Empress General Manager Roberta Goodman lugs a case of organic food from the Food Bank delivery truck to the sidewalk. Once unloaded, she and the volunteers, such as the one next to her, take the delivery inside to the community room, where residents take what they want.

PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

with the Department of Public Health.

Residents recall November 2005, when Prince Charles and his then-bride, the Duchess of Cornwall, visited the Empress, hand-picked for them as a shining example of Mayor Newsom's Housing First program. Charles was intrigued by conversations with the formerly homeless residents, and the SRO got its 15 minutes of international fame.

"We had to ask people in the hotel what they needed most," shopper Goodman says, as she moves on to the Food Bank's protein bars. "Food was high on the list. So we've tried to create a regular institutional program that sup-

ports them. It was a success from the first day."

San Francisco has the highest priced groceries in the nation and the Tenderloin has the lowest per capita income in the city. No supermarkets exist in the TL, and pricey mom-and-pops, top-heavy with snacks, eat right through a wallet.

GOODMAN swings open a massive steel door to find a cavernous refrigerator practically empty. Sverdlov says the Food Bank seldom if ever gets meat donations, and across the board, donations are down, she says. "Short-coded" items with expiration dates and dented cans are increasingly going to secondary markets like FoodsCo and dollar stores, she says. The Food Bank does receive short-coded donated items and will distribute food beyond their expiration dates, based on guidelines set by the Food Marketing Institute.

"Last week, I was lucky and found some salami," Goodman says. "Usually there's cheese and cottage cheese and yogurt and milk in here."

There are considerations. Not everyone has teeth, and some won't eat certain products. Such "customized" shopping made the program a hit from day one, she says.

Her choices are also weight sensitive. The Food Bank charges 18 cents a pound for everything but bread, which is 4 cents a pound. She avoids many canned items. But once she determines a theme for the day — a key item like tostad shells — she selects supporting items that make it easy to build a meal. Canned diced tomatoes, chiles and chili beans go onto the cart. She did pasta last week.

The next day, when the Food Bank delivers the order to the Empress, it will heap on free bonus bread and fruits and vegetables, usually stuff that perishes quickly like lettuce and bananas and always potatoes and onions. But you never know what will arrive.

Goodman buys by the case, expecting a turnout of up to 60, an impressive 75% of the Empress' residents. She sets quantity limits per resident to keep the shopping fair.

On her cart's growing stack go 48 protein bars in two cases, eight-to-a-box Krunchers chips, mini Triskets and Tamara sauce — last

month the condiment was mustard because the refrigerator occasionally carries hot dogs. She breaks into a big smile upon discovering mackerel, not in tins, but in plastic envelopes. Two boxes go on. Today, she skips the Top Ramen. But the Shrek bags of gummie candy might make a capricious treat so she tosses them on, too.

"I'm thinking about popcorn," Goodman says, "but we have it a lot and they get tired of it. I got pretzels last week and people didn't like them. I don't know why."

The food giveaway is more than making sure poor people have enough to eat. It's part of the Empress' nudge to residents to learn life skills so that they may one day leave the SRO to fashion a new life. To that end, Goodman gave all the residents crock pots last Christmas.

At the checkstand, checker James Harper does all the weighing. After a last-second dash to the shelves for more tostad shells, the total is \$51.93. That's for 297 pounds. By the next morning, Goodman guesses, the delivery plus what the Food Bank will add — in all there will be more than two dozen food items — will weigh close to half a ton because of heavy vegetables. All of it free to the SRO's residents.

"It stays between \$50 and \$60," Goodman says. "It comes from a combination of Empress and DISH budgets."

Resident Robert Abate last April helped make the weekly shopping trip a routine, she says. It was such a success from the outset that when the Department of Human Services heard about it, it hired Abate part-time to shop and create weekly pantries for 10 other SROs.

MARKET day causes a ripple of excitement among Empress residents: Free food and surprises brought to their fingertips. Growing anxious in the lobby the next morning were Goodman and four resident volunteers, who go to the head of the shopping line when the market opens.

The Food Bank delivery truck was a half hour late, but at 11:30 a.m. on a sun-splashed day, the truck pulled up at 144 Eddy, double parked and lowered a wooden pallet of food stacked 5 feet high onto the street. On top, supplementing Goodman's order, mesh bags

bulged with gigantic potatoes, another with 50 pounds of bright orange carrots, and boxes of yams and frozen spinach. The volunteers hefted the load onto the sidewalk, then onto a cart that made several trips back to the community room where Goodman creates the market.

Helping today is lanky Denny Johnson, 53. He's been at the Empress six months. He pauses in the lobby. The food he'll get today, he says, will last a week.

"I have something to eat whenever I run out of money because of what she's done," Johnson says of Goodman. "She puts a lot into it, and it helps us, believe me. This is one of the best places I've ever been. If you don't get along here, you don't want to."

Before the delivery, George Johnson, 47, is also waiting to help unload. He told The Extra about moving in to the Empress two years ago and said the latest positive turn in his life is the food giveaway.

Born on a Paiute Indian reservation in Nevada, Johnson always had trouble holding a job. He was homeless for 10 years before he ran into a social worker who helped change his life.

"All the (homelessness) time was bad," Johnson said. "I struggled to learn where to get food and find a shower. Some places I took food out, but it wouldn't last but a day."

"Then I met a social worker who helped me out and got me SSL. She got me in a recovery program and when I graduated she got me in here two years ago. I really admired her. She's in South Africa working now. If I ever see her again I can show her that her efforts were not in vain."

Before May, when the food deliveries started, Johnson hit the junk foods pretty hard. When he went shopping, it was for unhealthy snacks. Now he's making healthier choices because of the food put in front of him. He says his consciousness has been raised, though he confesses succumbing to an occasional Hi Ho. He thinks he's probably eligible for food stamps but says there's no need because he's eating so well.

"This has upgraded a part of my life," Johnson says. "And it has allowed me resources so I can take care of myself. What's that saying, 'Feed him a fish and it's for a day, but show him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime.'"

"A lot of the time, I don't want to leave. It's overwhelming out there, chaotic, too much for me to handle on a daily basis. I used to be homeless. Now I spend most of my time in my room. Kinda ironic."

Another volunteer is Gregory Shaw, 54, a three-year resident. He has mastered chicken, fish, eggs, bacon — which he buys himself — and vegetables in his microwave. But the pantry food doesn't excite him and doesn't last him as long as it does the others.

"May I be candid?" Shaw asks. "It depends on your needs, but it lasts me about two days. It's the same stuff week after week and there are some things I won't eat. There's seldom any meat — hot dogs and jerky sometimes. Not that I'm not grateful. If it weren't for this, I'd be back at Glide and St. Anthony's more often."

Shaw is a Vietnam veteran who once owned his own home. He has worked as a cemetery operator, truck driver and shipyard rigger. But he fell on hard times. In 2001, he had the "cabbage" heart operation — five coronary bypasses — and he has mental issues, too, he says. Yet, he is handsome, well-dressed and appears fit.

"I got a new life through Care Not Cash," he says of the mayor's program that brought him to the Empress. "The food here helps quite a bit, especially on weekends and in rainy weather. It frees us to eat healthier. And it's self-help."

Back in the community room, a large green "Empress Food Market" sign is a wall backdrop for the shopping that will start at 1:45 p.m. and last for two hours. Goodman is arranging items on tables shaped in a horseshoe, calling on her aesthetic bent to construct towers of boxed foods. She puts other foods in attractive baskets and scatters produce as if it had spilled out of a cornucopia. She's especially fond of the red Radio Flyer wagon on the floor, now

laden with potatoes nearly the size of footballs. Items have limit signs and the two-potato limit, even if eaten every day, could last a week.

The Empress pantry was actually started by the hotel's tenant representative Randy Wilson three years ago, explains Abate, who stopped by. But it consisted of just the baseline Food Bank delivery drop, not the customized shopping that Goodman and Abate added last May.

"It was hit or miss before," Abate said. "We never knew what bags we were getting and there was some waste. But what Roberta has now is unique. It's a model the way it's set up, and she has the space for it."

The Department of Human Services, which hired Abate as a shopper last year, has 25 SROs in its Housing First Master Lease program; 17

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Food Bank pantries in Tenderloin

THE Food Bank, according to its Website, delivers to these 37 pantries in the Tenderloin. The Aranda, Elk, Empress and Mentone/Coronado (one delivery) hotels are the newest additions.

PANTRIES SERVING NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS

Southeast Asian Community Center
Tenderloin Self-Help Center
Turk Street Corps, Salvation Army

PANTRIES SERVING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Curran House
Tenderloin Elementary School

PANTRIES SERVING SENIORS

Alexander Residence
Antonia Manor*
Boeddeker Recreation Center
Dorothy Day Community*
Eastern Park apartments*
Maria Manor
Marlton Manor
St. Anthony Foundation
Vietnamese Elderly Mutual Assistance

PANTRIES SERVING ADULTS IN SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

111 Jones Street Apartments
Ambassador Hotel
Aranda Hotel
Cadillac Hotel
Civic Center Residence
Dalt Hotel
Elk Hotel
Empress Hotel
Franciscan Towers
Glide Community Housing Inc.
Indo Chinese Housing
Mentone, Coronado hotels
Pacific Bay Inn
Plaza & Ramon Apartments
Ritz Hotel
Sierra Madre & Klimm Apartments
Tenderloin Housing Clinic — Hartland Hotel
The West Hotel

PUBLIC MEAL PROGRAMS

Glide Community Food Program
St. Anthony Dining Room ■

*Operates two pantries

Goodman and a volunteer place items on covered tables and arrange them in an appetizing fashion.

