

18 SoMa pantries: 1.6 million pounds of food in '09

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Yolanda Villasenor, who has lived at The Rose for two years and said that with her fixed income, food barely stretches to the end of the month. "I may go buy a little meat to add to the rice bowl."

Laurence Heard, a Rose resident since 1997, says there's plenty of variety in the weekly pantry, though he, too, would like more meat. Once, he recalled, there were turkey links, a special treat to him.

"No question — this is our most popular program at the Rose," said Keith Bussey, the hotel's support services manager.

For any food left on the tables after everyone has gone through the line, people queue for seconds. This day, the leftover bounty is likely to include produce from the two 50-pound sacks of onions and one 50-pound bag of potatoes. One man said he'd make a pile of potato salad.

After people have a shot at seconds, unclaimed food is left out for a few hours after the pantry officially closes for the day.

"We leave it on the table and it will go," Bussey said with certainty.

NO LEFTOVERS

The outdoor food pantry line at Hospitality House's Tenderloin Self Help Center, at 290 Turk St., stretches up the block to Leavenworth and moves glacially. People holding small orange tickets are still waiting their turn an hour after a metal door is rolled up, exposing a small, unfinished garage piled high with food.

Unlike the line at Bessie Carmichael, where many parents tote babies and seem to know each other, and the one at The Rose, where fellow hotel residents banter while they wait, this is a line of mostly strangers. They're quiet, serious-looking, and they shift their weight and crane their necks to see what food is up ahead at this Wednesday's pantry, which the center calls "Veggie Day."

Apples and potatoes, celery, canned vegetables, dry white rice, stove-top stuffing, chocolates and whole chickens cram the tiny space. Three volunteers and April Valentine, activities peer advocate, make sure everyone gets a chicken, if they want it, and some of each of the other items.

Standing apart from the line, a man talks loudly. He says some people will take a chicken and try to sell it around the corner.

"This isn't an issue I've dealt with," center Program Manager Elvis Byrd told The Extra. "But we have the attitude that once we give hungry people food to eat, it's theirs."

The center used to hand out pre-filled bags on pantry days, but Valentine now sets up the food farmers' market-style so people can take what they want.

"There's no waste — we almost never have leftovers," Byrd said. "But there are favorites: meat of any kind, sweets, yogurt, cookies."

Everyone who walks away with groceries smiles and thanks pantry volunteers. Still, little glitches happen. A woman gets to the

front of the line but has no ticket and insists she never got one. Valentine, who handed out the tickets, stays calm. "It's not fair to the others," she tells the woman several times. After protesting for another 30 seconds, the woman wanders off up the street.

"Sure, the need is getting greater — I think about half the people in our line are homeless," Byrd said. "Last year, our weekly pantry numbers held steady at around 50 people. Now it's way above 60." Valentine says the number in line this day was more like 100.

A woman halfway back in the line wonders aloud, to no one in particular, "Is there bread up there today? I like bread."

For the holiday, local bread companies donated 11,000 whole wheat loaves to the Food Bank, according to Media Manager Stacy Newman. The precious staple went only so far. The Rose Hotel pantry got some. Bessie Carmichael and Tenderloin Self Help didn't.

As the line dwindled, a neatly dressed senior approached Valentine and asked politely, "Is this line just for people who live in the Tenderloin? Or is it for anyone? Do you just get in line?"

Valentine explained that anyone was welcome to come and take a ticket. The man thanked her and said he'd be back next week.

Hunger is real and, for many, persistent. One more statistic: Between 2006 and 2008, the number of seniors in America living alone who visited food pantries jumped 81% — from 225,000 to 408,000.

The mailer in the San Francisco Food Bank's year-end request for donations quoted a regular pantry-user: "Too much month at the end of the money." ■



PHOTO BY MARJORIE BEGGS

At the end of the Bessie Carmichael pantry line, Maria Cecilia Bautista has two bags full of food for her family.

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