

COMMUNITY

The business of poverty

Number of poor, and those on government aid, continues to rise in county

By Mike Lamb

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BARSTOW — The assembly line inside the food warehouse at the back of Desert Manna is full of action.

Cans of beef stew and green beans are rapidly placed into brown bags. As soon as one volunteer empties a case, another volunteer rushes over with more cases, plastic covers quickly ripped off.

A dozen volunteers from various churches showed up on Wednesday to prepare for the following day's distribution extravaganza. Hundreds of people were expected to line up along the back alley way along the Desert Manna buildings with hands reached out for food.

Jonathan Lomaskin, wearing a Desert Manna shirt, scurries along the assembly line, clipboard and pencil in hand. It's all he can do to keep up with the fast pace. His job is to log items and amounts being being distributed.

Desert Manna CEO and President Darrin Fikstad stands at the large doorway into the facility.

"All this here will be gone tomorrow," he says, glancing at the 2,000-squarefoot area filled with 30 pallets of food, stacked 6 feet high. Three commercial freezers are stationed just close enough for volunteers to grab dairy products. Cases filled with green beans are stacked along the wall as well.

"This is Daggett," Fikstad says as Rose Kemp enters the doorway.

"The chicken is not here yet. The truck is not here yet," Fikstad tells Kemp. "But do you want some produce? I have some lettuce too."

Kemp doesn't need the chicken.

"I'll take it," Kemp says, referring to the produce.

Because Thursday's distribution is too far away for her neighbors, Kemp is gathering her monthly load of food to take back to Daggett. The distribution to Daggett is among more than 25 area food pantries receiving food from Desert

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ABOVE: Greg Turner carries his groceries home from Desert Manna's monthly commodities distribution on Thursday. Like many, Turner depends on the groceries to stretch his fixed income.

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Manna. Lunches are also provided to area students during the summer months.

"We have a little farmer's market," Kemp said. "We have a lot of people that don't have cars. They can't get here, so we drive it to them."

Nationwide, unemployment is way down. Gas is still below \$2 in some parts of the country. But in Barstow and San Bernardino County, poverty is rising, experts say.

According to a San Bernardino County report called Our Community Vital Signs 2013 report, 30 percent of Barstow's population is below the poverty level. However, other available data suggests a more severe picture.

Data provided by the San Bernardino County Human Services Department to the Bradco Companies claims 64 percent of Barstow's population is receiving some type of government aid. That percentage has risen steadily from 10 years ago when it was only 25 percent. The cash value of government aid in 2015 topped \$98 million in 2015.

Barstow Unified School District Superintendent Jeff Malan says 80 percent of students in the district qualify for free lunches.

"That has steadily increased over the years," Malan said. "Families have greater needs than in the past."

That rising need is being witnessed by variety of nonprofit organizations and churches who deal with the poor in Barstow.

Fikstad says the rising poverty trend in Barstow is “massive.”

“This is our business,” Fikstad said. “We are in the poverty business.”

While economic development lags in this city of 23,000, the poverty business is booming. Desert Manna offers not only shelter to the homeless, but food distribution to the poor and helps fill food pantries throughout the Barstow area. It’s working with job training organizations such as CalWORKS and veteran organizations as well to get vets off the streets.

Business is so good that Desert Manna plans to move out of the two historic buildings on First Avenue and expand to two new locations in Barstow. Plans are underway to build an affordable housing complex complete with social services on East Main Street along Interstate 40. And its food distribution program is going to expand and hopefully move into a larger facility on West Main Street which was once Valley Lumber.

Fikstad also has identified a building located at Union and Seventh Streets in downtown Victorville to act as a warehouse for Desert Manna.

“Our food program went from in 2014, 250,000 pounds of food, to 2015, 600,000 pounds,” Fikstad said. “Every time I bring a load of food, they will wipe me out in two hours when it’s advertised. They take everything. They get 50 to 60 dollars worth of groceries every time I do this.”

Desert Manna draws food from various sources that have distribution centers in the San Bernardino/ Riverside area. A refrigerator truck is sent down to Feed America, Community Action Partnership and Feeding the Children.

Feeding America offers training and technical assistance for food banks and solicits donations of food at the corporate level for nationwide distribution to member food banks. Feeding America also develops and implements the standards of operation of member food distributors such as Desert Manna, and monitors all operations regularly.

Community Action Partnership spokeswoman Marlene Merrill said food is obtained from government agencies such as U.S. Department of Agriculture, donations from grocery stores and other businesses. She said the network covers more than 150 nonprofit agencies, many of them in the Barstow and Victor Valley area.

Brandon Romano, program manager for Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County, said Desert Manna receives enough food for 650 households each month. However, his organization provides food to other smaller agencies in the Barstow area.

“Desert Manna is one of the larger sites we support, if not the largest,” Romano said. “With the frozen products you are probably talking 30,000 pounds of food.”

In 2015, Romano said his organization distributed roughly 11 million pounds of food to the network of nonprofits in the county.

“Roughly half of that 11 million (pounds) is USDA products, which we are distributing today,” he said. “The other half is through donations. We have donations from Stater Bros. and Amazon which are our two biggest donors. Feed the Children is a good partner of ours as well. Transport companies, retail stores.”

Romano said food is donated through a salvage program. He explained that often times products are brand new and fresh but have to be turned away by stores because the product was in a damaged box. He gave the example of a transport company donating 10,000 pounds of chicken because a stack of five pallets moved.”

“There are all kinds of interesting ways food could go to waste,” he said.

Desert Manna also gets food from area grocery stores, as well as Wal-Mart, Starbucks, Fort Irwin National Training Center and Marine Corps Logistics Base. Food that would be normally tossed because of approaching expiration dates is offered to Desert Manna. The Salvation Army is one of Desert Manna’s best customers. Maj. David Ebel is in charge of the Barstow outreach operation and supports Fikstad’s claim that poverty is rising. He said the Salvation Army is feeding 200 families a month in Barstow.

“What is interesting is the amount of people who are at the crisis point,” Ebel said. He just moved his operation to larger downtown storefront location behind Union Bank.

“We are not just seeing the faces everybody sees — the perpetually homeless. Something happened. And out of that something happened, there is a crisis in their life. They had to spend what they had to get the car fixed, or whatever. So we try to help them get back on their feet.”

Besides nonprofit organizations, agencies and churches, help also comes from groups of people who just want to help. Sandra Murray is a military wife whose husband is stationed at the Marine Corps Logistics Base.

She started Blessings, which basically started in her kitchen. She started baking bread to feed the homeless. But her group has expanded and now she also gets food from Feeding America and holds food distribution events at Bethany Christian Fellowship, which is located in a neighborhood behind Wal-Mart.

At 9 a.m. Thursday, there was already a long line of people formed along the alley way behind Desert Manna.

“The food is awesome. We depend on it every month,” Lauren Clark said. She and her boyfriend live on Social Security Disability and had been standing line for almost two hours before getting close to the distribution station.

“The extra food helps me,” said Byrl Agnew, who is also on SSI. “I live on my own. I’m not homeless. I have my own place. It gets me through the month. It’s a real blessing.”

Brandon and Cheyenne Goldie were near the back of the line with 6 monthold Nevaeh. They were homeless for two years after leaving Indiana and recently found housing in Barstow.

“We come here for food because our refrigerator is empty,” Brandon Goldie said. “It helps us a lot. This is the only place that will help us besides the Salvation Army.”

Fikstad recognizes the long wait for everybody standing in line for the food.

“The good news is everybody is going home with same thing — the first person in line to the last person in line. I have that much,” he said. “You are going to get a variety of canned goods, get a 10-pound bag of frozen chicken, then you get some bread, and a little bit of dessert. Then at the produce area you are going to get green beans and you are going to get acorn squash, cantaloupe, cucumbers, lettuce. I should still have enough watermelon for everybody.

“You can see the look on their faces out there,” Fikstad said. “This is working poor. And 50 percent are seniors. That is your No. 1 poverty population — seniors. So what are you going to do about it?”