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New food drive set

It isn't an accident that Josh Johnson and his company are choosing to begin their annual food drive as the Christmas season dies down.

Johnson is leading a Western States Equipment Co. food drive that kicks off Dec. 29 and runs through Feb. 9. "Traditionally, the giving season is all through the holidays when people are feeling generous," Johnson said. "But after Christmas comes and goes and the excitement dies down, people can lose interest or forget."



Western States is one of more than 40 local companies that have donated to food banks during the past two months, several of which opted to cancel their corporate Christmas parties and instead donate what they would have spent to the food bank, said Buck Horton, chairman of the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank.

Kim Smith of the Idaho Falls Bank of Commerce listens to Burnell Walker of the Bonneville County Sheriff's Office explain how the bank's food donation will be sorted into boxes by inmates at the jail and then handed over to the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank.

"What I'm seeing is a lot of companies, both small businesses and big corporations, have really stepped up their efforts to provide for the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank," he said. "It's such a blessing that companies realize there are others in the community who are in need."

During the three-month period from November to January, Horton's food bank receives 50 percent to 60 percent of its yearly total of donations.

That holiday boost works out well because the food bank provides more food in November and December than in any other months. But for reasons Horton cannot quite pinpoint, July is the third busiest month in terms of demand for food. And July is not one of the biggest months for receiving donations.

So Horton applauds Western States' fresh approach to giving. He also works with area schools and churches to schedule food drives during slower, non-holiday months. But that doesn't mean Horton doesn't welcome the Christmastime influx of donations with open arms. Through November, the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank has provided food to 7,009 needy families this year. That's a record for the food bank and 9 percent more than the 6,435 families the organization served during all of 2008.

Luckily, donations are on the rise, too. So far, Horton's organization has collected \$120,000 in donations this year, besting the \$113,000 collected a year ago and the approximately \$100,000 that came in during 2007, he said.

Eastern Idaho Community Action Partnership food warehouse manager Howard Johnson has also noticed an increase in need. His organization stores and supplies food for 14 eastern Idaho food pantries scattered across seven counties -- including the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank.

"I've been here three years, and I've seen demand increase every year," he said. "It's up 40 percent compared to numbers a year ago."

Though demand has reached an all-time high, food pantry supervisors say the community's support is helping them meet the challenge.

"Normally, you come down here and see the shelves are very close to empty, but that's not the case today because of all the recent donations," Horton said. "We can always use help all throughout the year, but we're sitting fairly good right now."

And that's the way Johnson and Western States Equipment Co. hope to keep it. The company's goal is to fill with food two Haul dump trucks, which hold a payload of 75,000 pounds. Western States will also match donations that are received, up to \$17,000, Johnson said.

"We realize people need a good dinner for Christmas, but they need a good dinner every day after Christmas, too," Johnson said. "That's the reason why Western States chose the season after Christmas for our campaign."

Want to help?

The Western States Equipment Co. Dump Hunger Drive runs from Dec. 29 to Feb. 9, 2010. Anyone wishing to make a donation can drop nonperishable food items or checks at Western States Equipment Co., 1200 Foote Drive, or Schlotzky's Deli, 2310 E. 17th St. Visit www.westernstatescat.com/dumphunger for more details. To contact the Idaho Falls Community Food Bank, call Buck Horton at 390-1952. To contact Eastern Idaho Community Action Partnership, call 522-5391.