

Bakery, produce program called a game changer

By Tom A. Throne

Fresh produce and bakery products are a big hit with patrons at the Samaritan Community Center, 1211 W. Hudson in Rogers.

A new distribution program was implemented by the Northwest Arkansas Food Bank in September. Previously, the produce and bakery products were distributed from the Food Bank's warehouse on June Self Drive in Bethel Heights. Now the products are taken directly from area pickup points to participating partner agencies.

"By making the switch, we were able to improve the quality of the products being distributed," said Carrie Harlow, chief operations officer at the Food Bank.

The program switch has been very successful with nearly 35,000 pounds of produce and bakery goods given away in January. By taking the products directly to the partner agencies, they are able to save 60 percent more produce and baked goods.

There are nine agencies currently participating in the distribution program with the eventual goal to provide the services to all the agencies that want it, she added.

"It's a big game changer," said Courtney Wrinkle, market coordinator at the Samaritan Center. "Our clients would rather have fresh produce over mac and cheese."

The homeless clients talk about how much they value the produce, said Eujeanie Luker, café program coordinator.

The center receives four to five pallets of produce and bakery items every Monday, Luker said. The products are split between the café and the market programs. There are a lot seasonal fruits and vegetables on the pallets, some of which clients couldn't afford to purchase on their own, such as pomegranates and mangoes.

The contents of the pallets fluctuates from week-to-week, said Wrinkle. There is always an abundance of apples.

"You never know what you're going to get," she added.

Luker said they received several veggie trays, probably left over from Super Bowl promotions, and they steamed the veggies and served them for lunch. If there is enough lettuce, lunch patrons may have salads for three or four days.

During the summer, the center supplements the Food Bank's produce from its two organic gardens.

"We can't get too many fresh veggies," Luker said.

When the center receives the pallets, volunteers will sort through the produce and remove the bad items, which then go into the compost pile to be used on the gardens, said Wrinkle.

Luker told about one client who came in asking about items for a birthday cake for her daughter. Because of the bakery programs, they were able to supply her with a birthday cake. Her daughter was thrilled.

