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Food distribution draws hundreds

BY ART HOVEY / *Lincoln Journal Star*
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One hundred people waited in line an hour before an annual pre-Thanksgiving distribution of food and \$10 food certificates began Tuesday at the F Street Recreation Center in Lincoln.

By the time volunteers were ready to start handing out the frozen turkeys, chickens and other provisions, the line had grown to more than 200.

Nicole Willis, 37 and mother of two teenage sons, choked back tears as she tried to describe the importance of the food she was carrying away in her plastic sacks.

"Whether you're homeless or just low-income, we can't afford to feed our own families," she said.

As young mothers clutching babies and elderly people pushing walkers joined Willis in the procession toward the exit, Jennifer Hernandez of Nebraska Appleseed talked about the disconnect between plenty and not enough.

Between 50,000 farmers and 80,000-plus Nebraskans eligible for food stamps. Between annual food-production stockpiles in the state big enough to feed 7 million people and 27,000 Lancaster County residents who live below the federal poverty line.

And she pointed to the importance of strengthening the food stamps portion of the farm bill as Congress gets ready to work on new, multi-year legislation.

"Farmers aren't the only ones who should be paying attention to the farm bill re-authorization," she said.

Nebraska Appleseed wants pressure put on federal lawmakers, for example, to reverse a pattern in which food stamps spending has been cut by more than \$30 billion over the past 10 years, and to raise the ceiling on personal assets set at \$2,000.

"That has not been raised for decades," Hernandez said.

Willis said a job that pays her about \$10 an hour for working four days a week puts her above the income eligibility limit.

In a city known for offering job security and relatively attractive benefit packages to thousands of university and state government workers, Lu-Ann Buffkins provided another poverty contrast at the rec center.

Buffkins, 52, an Omaha native and four-year resident of Lincoln, said she spent much of 2006 living in a tent in a local park and in her 1974 Dodge truck. Only recently was she able to find work as a security guard and get off the street.

The truck's transmission is "really crazy" and slow to engage when she moves the gearshift to reverse. That explains why she had to gun the engine and wait a few seconds to move away from the curb Tuesday.

How could she be going hungry in a state that produces so much food?

"You tell me," Buffkins responded. "I don't know."

Not far away, Hernandez monitored the Rec Center scene with Scott Young of the

Lincoln Food Bank and Beatty Brasch of the local Center for People in Need.

Nobody needs to tell any of them how important the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the food stamps program are in confronting hunger.

Young said USDA annually provides about 700,000 pounds of food to the Food Bank.

"The Agriculture Department is one of the largest feeding entities in the country."

Despite that, Brasch said, the food supply never seems to catch up with demand.

"The need has significantly increased," she said. "The rate of poverty is up. The number of hungry people is up."

But Hernandez said taxpayers here and elsewhere shouldn't regard food stamps as a drain on government resources.

In a report released Tuesday and titled "Not Just for Farmers," the center said that every \$1 billion spent on food stamps supports 3,300 farm jobs. Every \$5 spent on food stamps returns \$10 to a local economy.

Food stamps are an often vital option for elderly people on fixed incomes and for keeping younger people in the workforce.

"Food is the elastic part of the budget that gets cut," Hernandez said. "Whenever they can't do it, they cut food first."

"Nobody should have to stand in line for a Thanksgiving meal," she said, "or for any meal."

Reach Art Hovey at (402) 523-4949 or ahovey@alltel.net.

On the Web

Readers can access the "Not Just for Farmers" Appleseed Center report at www.neappleseed.org

Food distributed

Lincoln's Center for People in Need will host three more, pre-Thanksgiving food and food-certificate distributions Thursday.

* Malone Community Center, 2032 U St., from 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.

* Oak Lake Free Evangelical Church, 3300 N. First St., 12:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.

* Easterday Recreation Center, 6130 Adams St., 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

For more information, call Beatty Brasch or Deb Daily at 476-4357.

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Print Page