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Need for free Thanksgiving food up; supply down

More elders, families with kids got meals yesterday, Hawai'i agencies report

Associated Press

The Salvation Army attracted a larger-than-normal number of needy people, including more elderly and families with children, to its annual Thanksgiving dinner in Honolulu yesterday.

The same was true elsewhere in Hawai'i for organizations that served early Thanksgiving dinners to the homeless and other people in need during a time when the state's economy is suffering from a downturn in tourism and a contraction of credit.

Salvation Army spokesman Daniel De Castro said his group usually feeds about 1,800 people on Thanksgiving Day, excluding volunteers who help with the event.

About 2,100 people requested free meals yesterday at Blaisdell Center, he said. But there were more elderly people in line, as well as families with children, than usual, he said.

"That tells me something, that people who wouldn't necessarily come to a place where they could get free food did come today," De Castro said. "It indicates a greater need."

On the brighter side, De Castro said, his organization was prepared for 2,500 people to request meals. There were plenty of donations of food from area hotels, restaurants and individuals, he added.

The remaining food will be used at the Salvation Army's year-round programs, such as residential substance-abuse treatment centers.

Lanakila Meals on Wheels also provided Thanksgiving dinners to about 800 low-income seniors and others, with the assistance of 275 volunteers, even though it has experienced a drop in donations.

Other programs that assist the needy year-round offered Thanksgiving dinners earlier in the week, and they also reported higher demand.

Surfing the Nations, a nonprofit Honolulu group started by surfers that operates social service programs, gave out 425 free food baskets in Kalihi on Tuesday, compared to 150 at the same time last year.

"We were shocked this week that there was that many," said Cindy Bauer, the group's director. "We barely made it. If we didn't have extra food, we wouldn't have made it."

Bauer added that "the toughest part of doing this is having to tell people you don't have enough food."

A year ago, her organization received 18 pallets of food from food banks weighing a total of about 8,000 pounds. On Tuesday, Bauer said, her group only was able to obtain 10 pallets.

Recipients are often thought of as substance abusers, Bauer said. But "these are people who have jobs," she said, noting that she has seen requests for food from three families living in the same

house.

Dick Grimm, president of the Hawai'i Foodbank, said the demand from social service organizations that provide food to the needy has increased all year, not just around Thanksgiving.

"There are a lot more people who are either unemployed or may have been laid off their second jobs," he said. "Our agencies are seeing double, maybe triple, the number (of recipients) they normally do."

The food bank used to make 40 deliveries per month of canned and bagged food to organizations around O'ahu. Last month, it made 58 drops and will total 51 this month.

Grimm said people who are being served by agencies he supplies are getting five or six pounds of food each instead of the 10 or 12 pounds they used to receive.

"They're having to do with less because we have fewer pounds (of food to provide) and there are more people" to serve, he said.
