



Left: Hugh Remley and Danney Kell (right) load boxes of food that they will distribute at their church, Mount Zion Temple in Clarkston. Below: Jim Macy, the executive director of the Food Bank of Oakland County, said the number of needy people in Oakland County is growing.

Staff photos by  
Sharon LeMieux



## 'It's really desperate'

### Food bank is hard pressed to feed needy

By Casey Hans  
staff writer

**W**ITH THE growing number of needy residents in Oakland County, Jim Macy is thankful he and his staff can offer some help.

Macy is the executive director of the Food Bank of Oakland County, a Pontiac-based clearinghouse which provides food to a network of smaller agencies which distribute it to some 50,000 county residents per month. Residents and community groups from all over Oakland County also hold food drives and make financial donations to benefit the food bank.

Macy said help is needed today, more than ever.

"It's really, really desperate," he said, talking about what has happened throughout Oakland County. "The general assistance people (who were cut), the unemployed, the underemployed, the low-waged working poor — their costs just keep going up."

Macy said there are 3,500 people living in the county who were recently cut from general assistance, 75,000 people who live below the poverty level, and another 30,000 to 40,000 people who live above the poverty level, but regularly have emergency situations.

THE HIGH price of housing deepens the problem. "Instead of spending the recommended 30 percent in come on housing and utilities, they're spending 70-80 percent," he said. "They're just hanging on by the skin of their teeth. And what's left you buy food with."

That's where the food bank helps. One of 100 national food banks and 12 in Michigan, the Food Bank of Oakland County collects food from

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— Jim Macy

companies which would otherwise take excess food or food with damaged containers to the garbage dump, and allows it to be warehoused and eventually shared with Oakland County residents who need it.

Large and small food drives, like one being sponsored by WXYT-AM radio and the Can Do project bring in thousands of pounds of food this time of year. Inserts into Oakland County community newspapers brought the food bank \$161,000 in donations last year to help run their operations. Many places of worship donate each year.

Also, during 1991, the state of Michigan spent money to purchase and package excess food from Michigan farmers which would have otherwise gone to waste in the fields. Oakland County's food bank received 800 cases of Michigan cherries plus some blueberries and lingering carrots, for example, and only paid shipping costs.

THE FOOD Bank of Oakland County just moved to a new facility this year, which expanded their food storage area from 1,450 square feet to 10,000 square feet. "There was no way we would have been able to accept what we've gotten this season," he added. "We've been able to accept whole truckloads of product."

In their former building, the food bank put out about 1 1/2 million pounds of food each year. Macy said he hopes to put out three million pounds, initially, from the new building.

Money from the food bank budget goes much farther than an average trip to the grocery store. For \$400, for example, a whole truckload of food will be brought in to serve the various soup kitchens, church groups and other non-profit agencies which are members of the food bank. A \$250 donation buys one ton of food, because the food bank pays only shipping charges.

Although the emphasis on food baskets and charitable donations is traditionally strongest during the holiday season, Macy said his group helps throughout the year.

Churches like the non-denominational Mt. Zion Church of Clarkston use the food bank year round.

"This year has been worse," said Danny Kell, who was at the Columbia Street warehouse picking up two small truckloads for the needy of his congregation. Kell has been helping in the church's program for two years.

"We used to do it (pick up food) every three or four months. It's a once a month thing anymore," he added. "It amazes you how many people are out there."

Macy estimated that of the 80 agencies the food bank serves, about 40 visit the warehouse in a given week.

He called it "a miracle, really, that these small agencies have done this. It's a tremendous network, with their only link as the food bank." He said the food bank movement, which began in Arizona 15 years ago and came to Oakland County in 1983, was the needed link between the food companies and those who so desperately need the food.

"Until that (the food bank system) we were like Ethiopia," he said. "The food was on the dock and there was no way to get it to the people."

"There will always be food that's unsalable and people who can use that food," he added.

Anyone interested in donating to the Food Bank of Oakland County can write to them at P.O. Box 430636, Pontiac, MI 48343 or call 332-1473.



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Parishioners of the Mt. Zion Temple of Clarkston wheel boxes of food from the food bank warehouse in Pontiac. They say they are com-

ing more often this year to get food for needy families in their area.