



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Putting throw-away food in bank

When I first learned about a food bank feasibility study for Delaware, I must admit I wasn't all that excited.

First off, I didn't know much about it. And what I did know left me wondering about the need and how it might be met.

But someone was nice enough to invite me to the first meeting of an advisory council for the study, so I went. And as they say in the song, I came away with a different point of view.

The whole concept has to do with making food, that might otherwise be wasted, available to people who need it. It's a self-help effort,

operated without a dime of government money. And, in those communities where it's already in place, it appears to be doing a whale of a job.

For instance, a food bank located in Baltimore distributes 150,000 pounds of food each month. Food that would otherwise be thrown away. And even though that food bank is in its infancy, it's already helping more than 6,000 people daily.

The food comes from manufactures, distributors, retailers, processors, even farmers who throw away thousands of pounds of food daily in the form of

dented cans, broken cases, and otherwise damaged but useable food. Before the Maryland food bank came along, this kind of food was just thrown away. But now it's picked up, inspected, cleaned up, and made useable. Then it's distributed to charitable agencies throughout Maryland.

Ann Miller, who is director of the Maryland Food Bank, told the Delaware group how that effort got started a few years back when it became obvious that many people in low-income status just weren't getting enough to eat. Even with food stamps and welfare, some people weren't able to make ends meet, and that meant they were going hungry. At the same time, she was able to discover that as much as 20 percent of this nation's food supply is thrown out in useable condition.

And so, using the food bank idea already in place in some other areas, she helped establish a non-profit corporation for the purpose of finding useable food and seeing that it is distributed to charitable organizations who will use it in feeding programs. Last year the Maryland Food Bank distributed 3.7 million pounds of useable food this way.

The food bank idea was helped along by tax reform laws passed in 1976 that allow a manufacturer to deduct the cost of producing donated food, plus 50 percent of the mark-up value. That means the food company that gives damaged merchandise to the food bank receives considerable tax credit. That was the incentive needed to

keep them from just loading it on a truck and hauling it to the dump.

It may sound like some food companies don't know what they're doing if they're throwing away useable food, but you must realize that in today's palatized, fork-lift society, a food wholesaler or processor can't deal very effectively with broken boxes, dented cans, peeling labels, and all of the other malformities that befall a percentage of the merchandise in this big-volume business.

It's a lot of tonnage and it helps feed a lot of people, but it's a small share of the business. With the tax law and the appeal of the food bank, those firms are now setting aside that damaged merchandise, and in some cases actually delivering it to the food bank warehouse.

One major retailing chain in the Baltimore area currently provides approximately 16,000 pounds of food each week to the bank. Others provide lesser supplies. And it's everything from Twinkies to watermelons, from spaghetti sauce to canned pears, from ice cream to rye bread. Good useable food that is inventoried and made available through reputable, charitable agencies that are working to feed hungry people.

As mentioned earlier, the food bank operated without government money. In fact, it's self-supporting, by charging a flat rate of nine cents a pound to the agencies who draw food from its shelves. Three hundred and fifteen of these agencies ranging from store-front

churches to some of the more well-known charitable organizations, shop there.

It was a surprise to me that such a volume of food is available. In fact, Miller said warehouse space is always a problem. Sometimes they have to turn away large donations because they just don't have room.

So, is the same situation true in Delaware? Are there companies who would donate food and are there agencies who would use such a service? Well that's what the food bank feasibility study was all about. Patricia Knodel, who is project manager for the study, assembled a group of citizens with varied interests in food production and food utilization. They've been asking a lot of questions, trying to find out if food might be made available to the many agencies in Delaware who are operating feeding programs. They've talked with food processors, distributors, retailers, farmers, governmental agency people, charitable organizations, and others to find out if Delaware could support such an effort and if it's truly needed. With that sort of background the advisory group has approved the project. Now a lot of ground work must be done to make the food bank work.

Who will benefit from this effort? Hungry people. Those who, because of circumstances, are unable to get adequate food at home. This would be through community centers, senior centers, day care centers, shelters,

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