

Food for drought-impacted Ivanhoe

By Stephanie Weldy

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(Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto/Visalia Times-Delta)

A line of 300 people snaked through the parking lot of Walnut Grove Assembly of God Church in Ivanhoe Thursday afternoon. The line was made up of mothers with children — some pushing strollers along — husbands and wives, and friends and neighbors.

As each group made its way to the front of the line, they were moved from table to table and collected a variety of food items.

Into cardboard boxes went 2-pound bags of lettuce, plums, oranges, loaves of sourdough bread and other food staples being distributed by the Visalia Emergency Aid Council and other local organizations.

Those who went out, left struggling to carry the 40 to 50 pounds of food they were given.

Roughly 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of food was distributed Thursday to Ivanhoe residents, along with residents of surrounding communities, through the Emergency Aid's new Ivanhoe mobile food pantry which made its launch Thursday. It will continue to feed the drought-impacted area each fourth Thursday of the month in the church parking lot.

The launch of the Ivanhoe pantry was made possible from a \$25,000 grant that the Walmart State Foundation awarded to VEAC Thursday.

VEAC Executive Director Liz Wynn said she was thrilled to receive the grant and said the funds will be used to purchase basic food staples for the local hungry — including beans, rice, peanut butter, macaroni and cheese, pasta, tomato sauces and more.

"It really allowed us to fulfill our dream of coming to these rural communities that are under-served and the impact it makes on their lives is tremendous to them," Wynn said.

"They don't understand what it means to this community.



Top: Volunteers Pastor Phil Miller, from right, and Peggy Miller hand carrots to Ron Pierson and Marie Pierson Thursday during the Visalia Emergency Aid Council's mobile food pantry called the Neighborhood Market fresh produce and food bag giveaway for those in need at the Walnut Grove Assembly of God parking lot in Ivanhoe. Above: About 300 people waited in line Thursday. (Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto)

This \$25,000 — we can stretch it and buy food for pennies on the dollar with our partnerships with Community Food Bank and FoodLink [for Tulare County]. It will really go a lot further than even if they gave us product."

Community Food Bank of Fresno helped to make the pantry even more of a success by donating 5,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables.

Wynn said Ivanhoe has a huge population in need of assistance not just because of the impact the drought has had on the largely agricultural community, but also because of a fire Sept. 17 that destroyed Phillips Farms fruit packing house in north Ivanhoe last month, and which put 75 people out of work.



Volunteers Dan Labogin, left, and Shirley Garcia, right, hand Allison Quiroz some bags of pinto beans and corn flakes Thursday during the Visalia Emergency Aid Council's mobile food pantry called the Neighborhood Market fresh produce and food bag giveaway for those in need at the Walnut Grove Assembly of God parking lot in Ivanhoe. (Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto/Visalia Times-Delta)

Since June, VEAC has begun seeing a lot of new faces needing assistance, Wynn said. About 150 additional families each month have been heading to the non-profit organization, she said. And last month, since the fire, an additional 200 new families headed to VEAC for help.

"They have to make the choice between paying rent and putting food on the table for their children," Wynn said. "At least we can alleviate that a little by providing some supplemental food."

Grateful for the help

Laverne Tomlin, 52, Doris Tucker, 64, and Elmira Hamilton, 54, headed out to the mobile food pantry together.

The three Ivanhoe residents said they came out because they ran out of food at home.

The women have never received assistance from VEAC before, they said, but because of the drought, fruits and vegetables are too expensive for them to buy.

And because times are tough, they said, they are doing what they have to do to ensure there's food at home.

"We have children," Tomlin said. "Children you have to feed. And if you have extra people you've helped out, like me, I have a child who was homeless and now he's in the household with us, so I can't get anything for him because he's over the age of 18. He had nobody, so it's taxing on your income. He has to eat, too. I'm out there trying to do what I can to feed him as well as ourselves."

The three women said they are grateful VEAC is allowing them to get free food for their families.

"I think God has his hand in this," Hamilton said with a smile stretched across her face.

Betty Zaragoza, 33, of Ivanhoe said she was thankful to get fruits and vegetables and hopes the food will last her family of four through the end of the month.

Zaragoza said the new food pantry will benefit many in Ivanhoe, as they often don't have the means to travel to VEAC's brick-and-mortar pantry in Visalia.

"It's nice because its local," she said. "We don't have to go to Visalia or anything. There's a lot of people here who don't have vehicles, so it's hard for them to get out there."

The mobile food pantry was started last month in Goshen and now each third Wednesday of every month distributes food to Goshen residents.



Doris Tucker, center, gets a little help with fruits, vegetables and other food staples Thursday during the Visalia Emergency Aid Council's mobile food pantry called the Neighborhood Market fresh produce and food bag giveaway for those in need at the Walnut Grove Assembly of God parking lot in Ivanhoe. (Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto/Visalia Times-Delta)

Wynn said she's glad to see the new mobile program now expanded to Ivanhoe.

And to continue feeding the local hungry, VEAC is always in need of more food, she said, and for volunteers to help distribute that food.

"[Community members] can come and work at any of these events and help distribute food, we need volunteers for that." she said. "They can also donate. Thanksgiving is coming up, we need turkeys. Last year we served over 800 families. We expect, because of the increase in numbers now, we expect close to 1,000 or 1,200 people. And we really need turkeys. So when you're in the store buying a turkey for yourself, buy one more. Drop it off or call us and we'll come pick it up."

<http://www.visaliatimesdelta.com/story/news/local/2014/10/24/food-drought-impacted-ivanhoe/17820271/>