

[DEPARTMENT]

GIVING BACK

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PHOTO BY MARISSA MARTINSON

Going Mobile

The Mound food market on wheels fills the food gap for residents.

EVERYBODY RUNS OUT OF MILK or bread from time to time, and it's a nuisance. But for Mound's Brian Felt, and too many others like him, running out of basic food items can put his physical and emotional health in jeopardy.

There are systems in place to help area low-income residents procure food, but some programs leave people like Felt needing more. WeCAN, a local nonprofit that provides emergency assistance for housing, family support and food programs, including Meals on Wheels (MOW), is working to fill the food gap. To help clients whose nutritional needs weren't being met, they launched Mobile Market in August 2014 for low-income residents who can't get to a traditional food shelf due to transportation or physical issues. Clients, who must be at least 200 percent below the federal poverty line, fill out a food request form, and are allotted 25 to 30 pounds of food every other week.

The program, funded by private monetary or product donations, received a kickstart from the Olson Family Foundation's \$200,000 grant. "[The Olsons] are really dedicated to providing support for those in the community, especially as it relates to food," says Christie Larson, WeCAN executive director.

"Being in the food business for three generations, we wanted to be in the food category," Bruce Olson, who also regularly volunteers for the program, says. His grandfather was a grocery owner in Minneapolis, and his father opened a food brokerage, which Olson ran and eventually sold. "We're happy to be a part

of [Mobile Market]," he says.

Mobile Market makes specific delivery locations (CommonBond affordable housing in Maple Plain and Mound) where there's a concentrated group that can benefit from this service, says Larson. Volunteers organize food bags, load the program's van and deliver groceries to 40 apartment households. MOW recipients make up another dozen or so clients.

"It relieves the stressfulness of running out of fresh milk or other food," Felt says. He suffers from diabetic neuropathy (nerve damage), leaving him with limited mobility. The service helps him obtain food between the days when he's exhausted his financial resources and the arrival of his Social Security check.

Mary McKinley, a volunteer with Mobile Market since it began, says, "It addresses an overlooked need of a rapidly growing population, including people who, for whatever reason, can't get to a food shelf." McKinley thinks it also enables some recipients to remain living independently, delaying or avoiding the transition to long-term care facilities. "It's a huge program in a little bitty van," she says.

As the program gained speed, another in-need demographic was identified—children, particularly those who receive meal assistance through their school districts (schools provide breakfast and/or lunch to students from low-income families).

To address the issue, Mobile Market partnered with the Westonka School District to identify in-need students and give



WeCAN volunteers John Ehrlichmann, Caitlin Lietzau, Christie Larson and Carol and Bruce Olson.

them 10 pounds of kid-friendly food. "We have gotten very positive feedback," notes Larson. "When we piloted the program [in summer 2014], we served about 15 bags a week. During the 2014 Christmas break, we gave out more than 125 bags."

But where does all this food come from? In summer 2014, General Mills donated more than \$5,000 worth of food, enabling Mobile Market to get up and running, Larson explains. Other food sources include area food banks, where items can be purchased at a drastically reduced rate. Staff also visits local grocers for "food recovery" to purchase products that are nearing expiration dates or that the store is discontinuing. Local community gardens also donate fresh produce.

Increasing public awareness about Mobile Market is vital for its success, Larson says, but achieving that isn't always easy. "Especially in the Lake Minnetonka area, because there is a lot of wealth, people assume there isn't need, which isn't the case," Larson says. "There are still pockets of poverty in our area." //



WeCAN's service area includes Mound, Minnetrista, Rockford, Spring Park, St. Bonifacius, Tonka Bay, Navarre, Minnetonka Beach, Maple Plain, Loretto, Independence and Greenfield.

To find out how you can help, visit weCAN-help.org and click on the donation icon.