

crowd eats up free produce



New giveaway is promoting healthier living in Bloomsburg

By KRISTIN BAVER
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BLOOMSBURG — A new food giveaway featuring fresh produce was so popular on its first day organizers opened the doors an hour early to accommodate the line snaking down a hallway and around the building.

Six hours later, all that remained were "a couple peaches and half a case of cans," said Matt Korol, AGAPE's director of operations.

Jessica Fry, 35, hoped to use the items she snagged — bananas and other dry goods like lemonade mix and Pop Tarts — as snacks for her four children ages 3 to 11. It's difficult to stretch her husband's income from Bimbo Bakery near Hazleton each month, the Bloomsburg woman said. She clips coupons and juggles bills, letting some lapse one month then trying to catch up the next.

But it was the first time she had stopped at AGAPE, which runs several donation programs including free weekly meals.

The average household income of those served by AGAPE in Bloomsburg is just under \$1,000 each month, with 97 percent below the \$30,000 annual income mark, said Korol.

New faces

On Thursday, AGAPE was doling out about 1,600 pounds of food, worth nearly \$3,400, said Korol.

By day's end, 222 people had come through. "We saw a lot of new clients who didn't eat in our kitchen," Korol said. He expects the weekly event to continue to grow. A pilot program earlier this month drew 69 participants without any advertising.

Although the Fresh Express isn't intended to replace a trip to the grocery store, it should give people a chance to stock their pantries.

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OF PEACHES and boxes of bananas are on tables for people going through the food line at AGAPE on Thursday in Bloomsburg. Fresh Express gives people a chance to stock up on fruits and vegetables.

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cupboards with fresh fruits and vegetables.

In the first hour, the line remained steady, quickly filling in the allotted sign-in sheets and sending a volunteer scrambling for more paper.

Fixed income

About 20 percent of the shoppers were older folks many living on a fixed income, Korol said.

Freda Davis, 73, helps care for her 55-year-old daughter after the younger woman had a stroke. "Between her and I, we're always going to the doctor," she said.

The co-pays take a toll on her income. She's also a regular at AGAPE's weekly meal, which drew 145 people for a turkey dinner Thursday.

Paul Wilcox, 78, Bloomsburg, is another frequent face at the Daily Bread table.

After 20 years driving a tractor-trailer and 14 behind the wheel of a Millville school bus, Wilcox said he and his wife need the help to make ends meet on their retirement wage.

There's no income cap or proof of residency required for Fresh Express.

"We're trying to promote healthier eating," said Amber Lee, director of programs. "We just want people to get fresh produce."

No waste

The new produce effort was started through donations from Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, Rohrbach's, Geisinger Health Plan, and Col. Kirk's Auction House. Grant and Sheetz also regularly help stock AGAPE's shelves.

Sheetz gives ready-to-eat foods to the agency, literally five days a week, Korol said, so much that there is a shelf in the main office for clients to grab something during the week. "We hate throwing anything away," he said.

Short-dated items about to expire may be out of date before the next big pantry giveaway. But those are particularly helpful for the homeless, Korol said, who may be living in tents or sleeping on friends' couches.

Last year, AGAPE distributed about \$86,000 of food, said Korol. With the new produce program in place for the second half of this year, he expects that figure to top \$100,000 in 2015.

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