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Different approach at food bank works well

Accountability - At Birch, people contribute as well as receive, building a sense of community as well

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The Oregonian Staff

Some food banks and shelters find themselves struggling in the slowing economy, but Birch Community Services, a nonprofit organization in Northeast Portland, says its shelves remain full, because of its "tough love" approach to serving its clients.

The organization, which provides about \$700 worth of groceries to each of its 630 clients per month, is also gearing up for an increase in demand due to the sluggish economy, says its co-founder, Barry Birch. It recently added a 480-square-foot walk-in freezer and a cooler display box.

Birch says even though he hasn't seen an increase in overall demand, he is seeing a shift in causes. Before, families were "living on the edge and making it," but now families are on the program because of increases in food and transportation expenses such as gas and produce costs. And more families are on the program because of layoffs and home foreclosures, Birch said. "We've just seen the tip of the iceberg," he says.

Barry and Suzanne Birch started Birch Community Services in 1992 by providing three families with a couple loaves of smashed bread. Soon after, the Birch family was awash in donated food, toilet paper and produce.

Barry Birch said one day his son got off his school bus, and was too embarrassed to come home because of all of the products -- sanitary napkins and diapers -- in their front yard off of Northeast Couch Street and 80th Avenue.

Since then, the Birches have gone from serving three working poor families to 630 in the Portland area, and from running the organization out of their house to a warehouse off Northeast San Rafael Road, near 181st Avenue. Their organization is now a nonprofit with a board of directors and six employees, Suzanne Birch being one of them. Barry Birch, who was once the only full-time employee, is now retired and deals mostly with donations.

"Income doesn't always necessarily identify people in need," Barry Birch says, adding that he thinks the program serves one of the largest minorities of America -- the working poor. But Birch, 65, says the reason why his program is successful is because it stresses accountability and responsibility.

Once a referred family is accepted into the program, it pays monthly dues of \$45, which gives the family access to various services. Families can shop in a grocery store atmosphere once a week, and take classes on subjects ranging from a weight-loss support group to personal finance. There's a small area where they can get second-hand clothes, or choose from a range of boots donated by Danner Shoe Manufacturing.

After being on the program six months, participants have to volunteer two hours a month.

"It gives them ownership," says Suzanne Birch, 54. "They realize they are as much a part of it as anyone."

FACTBOX

At a glance Birch Community Services helps an estimated 10,000 people per week through its direct services and donations to community organizations such as the Portland Rescue Mission. A few examples of its work:

Last year, almost 8 million pounds of food went through the Birch Warehouse. Of that 8 million, 2.4 million was donated to Portland-area community and social service agencies.

Last August, the group sent 4,200 pairs of work boots to Tanzania, donated by Danner Shoe Manufacturing. The company usually donates about 8,000 pairs of boots per year to the organization.

Birch plans to add more clients to its direct-service roster, but would probably cap the number around 1,000 at its current location.

-- Nicole Santa Cruz;

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Almost all of the volunteers are also clients of the program.

Shelly Barre, a 36-year-old mother of four, says being on the program cut her grocery bill in half. She said she doesn't mind volunteering because of the positive vibe inside the warehouse.

In fact, the organization is able to sustain itself through the work of more than 500 volunteers per month donating more than 2,500 hours of time.

"You get to know the people," she said. "It is a family atmosphere."

Barre said her family has been on the program for six months and that, combined with other frugal changes, it has enabled her and her husband to climb out of a debt of more than \$35,000.

"I just think it's a great support for people who are working as hard as they can and trying to be responsible with money," she says while "shopping" on a Wednesday afternoon. Shelves are lined with neon Post-it notes scribbled with limits on what people can shop for. On this day, there's no limit on the bananas, but there's a three-loaf maximum on the bread, ranging from English muffins to whole-grain loaves.

Last year just less than 8 million pounds of food came through the Birch warehouse, most from local retailers and supermarkets with no use for damaged goods.

There's even a shelf with unlabeled canned food, which Barry calls "mystery cans."

"Someone once told me that green beans squeak," he says as he shakes a shiny silver can that is obviously not green beans.

Because of surging gas prices, program recipients who live more than 15 minutes away from the warehouse have the new option of picking out groceries for two 45-minute sessions instead of one session per week.

This benefits people such as Kathy Crow, a 54-year-old educator who lives in Vancouver.

Since the single mother of two is on summer vacation from her job, Crow has no need to drive to Gresham more than once a week, so she'll usually just run errands on Wednesdays and skip the warehouse the next week.

The organization also donates more than 200,000 pounds per month to more than 60 Portland community and social service agencies such as the Portland Rescue Mission or Union Gospel Mission.

But even with the success of the program, Barry Birch says the overhead costs such as transportation keep rising.

He said he worries about having to raise the \$45 fee, but is confident that families will be able to afford an increase, and if not, the program will make exceptions.

The organization has put on hold a campaign to double the number of families it serves, because officials didn't think it fit with the philosophy of the organization -- focusing on the people. "We don't want to become just a number," Barry Birch said. "We don't want to get so big that people don't get treated with care."

But with difficult financial times looming, Birch says a duplication of the unique program could be a good idea, rather than expanding to a larger warehouse.

"We're hardly scratching the surface," Birch says. "When you look at the need and how much of it we're able to satisfy, it's almost overwhelming."

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