

Season of Sharing: Birch Community Services in NE Portland lets members be part of food solution



By [Elliot Njus](#) | enjus@oregonian.com

on November 27, 2014 at 6:44 AM, updated November 27, 2014 at 6:45 AM

After Ziva McKinney and her husband got married, they soon learned their blended family would no longer qualify for state food assistance.

The news was potentially devastating for McKinney and her husband, Kevin, who have six children between them from previous marriages. Kevin already worked three jobs and donated blood plasma to make ends meet.

"We were in a desperate situation," Ziva McKinney said. "It was a humbling experience to realize how much help I needed."

Her pastor's wife suggested she look into [Birch Community Services](#). The Northeast Portland nonprofit operates like a members-only food bank for the working poor, particularly those who don't qualify for food stamps.

And in doing so, it diverts millions of pounds of food each year from area landfills.

Birch Community Services started in Barry and Suzanne Birch's garage 23 years ago, when they learned about some excess bread at a store that was going to be thrown out. They knew some single moms who would find a use for it, so they offered to pick it up.

"Soon our home was completely inundated with stuff," said Suzanne Birch, now the executive director.

Birch Community Services has grown into an organization with an \$11.9 million budget and a staff of eight. It took in \$10.3 million last year, mostly in-kind donations of food and other goods. Because of a fee for participants and a revenue-generating recycling program, Birch covers 71 percent of its own operating expenses.

In exchange for the \$60 a month fee, members can visit Birch's warehouse once a week to pick from a selection of donated foods, with an emphasis on the fresh and perishable. Last year Birch served 930 families, distributing 6.2 million pounds of food.

Birch Community Services

What your donation can do:

\$10: Provide financial training for a family.

\$50: Show a family how to grow their own food.

\$100: Feed a family of five for a month.

When McKinney joined Birch in January, she brought home fresh fruit and yogurt, healthy staples that had previously been luxuries for her kids.

"They literally started jumping up and down," she said.

The food comes from restaurants, markets or manufacturers who find themselves with too much food. Some items sport bruises or other superficial defects. Other items have lingered on shelves too close to their sell-by date — taken as beyond reproach at the grocery store but which in reality leaves days or weeks of usability.

Members are expected to volunteer for Birch at least two hours a month. Many spend that time picking up foods from donor stores and restaurants, giving Birch the flexibility to pick up food from a wider array of donors, even on short notice or odd hours.

"The participants themselves are really part of the solution," said Ray Keen, Birch's development manager. "We couldn't do it without them."

For McKinney's family, a year as Birch members has offered the flexibility to pursue new opportunities. Her husband is now working one job while attending Clackamas Community College. Meanwhile, they were able to find an affordable house to rent and pay off credit cards. McKinney has been able to home-school her children and help out at Birch as a volunteer by watching other members' children while they shop.

The program has put the McKinneys on a trajectory where they hope one day to no longer need the help.

That's the goal at Birch, which pairs the low-cost food with money management classes and goal-setting to try to get families on their feet. The average family participates in the program for 38 months. By the time they're ready to leave, they've cut their monthly debt payments by 28 percent and doubled their savings.

In the meantime, "we get to help out and feel like we're all part of a community," McKinney said. "We're not begging for scraps."

