

Food banks go high-tech to feed the hungry

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Adam Philmlee, left, and My Dao manually check a pallet of food for distribution at the Food Lifeline warehouse Tuesday, Nov. 24, 2009, in Seattle. Across the country, food banks are undergoing a high-tech revolution, adopting sophisticated databases, bar coding, GPS tracking, automated warehouses and other technologies used in the food industry that increasingly supplies their goods. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

(AP) -- Food banks across the country are undergoing a high-tech revolution, adopting sophisticated databases, bar coding, GPS tracking, automated warehouses and other technologies used in the food industry that increasingly supplies their goods.

It's a long way from handing out macaroni and canned soup from a church basement.

While more people can be fed through these innovations, food bank directors say it's also a sad acknowledgment that hunger has become a

huge and seemingly unending problem.

"What we tell people a lot is that we are a food distribution business wrapped in an altruistic skin," says Jan Pruitt, president and CEO of the North Texas Food Bank in Dallas.

Her food bank, along with Food Lifeline in Seattle and the Food Bank of Central New York in East Syracuse, are testing a \$60 million effort by Feeding America, an umbrella organization for about 200 U.S. food banks, to create a state-of-the-art national computer network that will greatly automate services.

The Athena Project, which started rolling out this summer, will let food banks upgrade and standardize accounting, inventory and donor software, take full advantage of the Internet, and manage pickups and deliveries much the same way FedEx or UPS track packages. Chicago-based Feeding America is installing the systems at no charge and separately from its operating budget, thanks in part to financial and in-kind donations, says Kevin Lutz, vice president for technology.

For local pantries and kitchens - and the people at their doors - it should mean more food and the kind they actually like and need, Pruitt and others say. Donors, from agribusinesses to the 10-year-old collecting cans at a birthday party, can be assured that less is being spent on overhead and more on helping the hungry.

"We are going to gain so much efficiency," says Linda Nageotte, Food Lifeline's president and CEO. "We're going to be able to provide so much better accountability, and this also really increases our credibility."

Lutz says that when the project is completed in five years, it could save food banks up to four times its \$60 million cost - money that could go toward food and other services.

Since the first food bank, St. Mary's in Phoenix, opened in 1967, many in the movement hoped they would soon work themselves out of business, Pruitt said. Instead, most agencies have become mainstays of their communities, supplying tons of food to pantries, soup kitchens and other local programs.

"In 1982, when this food bank opened, their first year of distribution was 400,000 pounds," Pruitt said, of her Dallas-based organization. "We now do that in one day."

The recession has only made things worse. Pruitt estimates food demand in her area has grown by a third in the past year. Nationally, Feeding America says the 63,000 local agencies served by its food banks aid more than 25 million people annually.

Without the new technology, "We just simply couldn't do what we do," says Carol Schneider, spokeswoman for the Food Bank For New York City.

In 2002, the food bank, which handles about 60 million pounds of food each year, replaced its paper system with a bar code system and wireless network at its 90,000 square-foot warehouse in the Bronx.

Food banks are trying to provide more fresh meat and produce, much of it gathered unsold from supermarkets. Pruitt says that means her 17 trucks have to quickly reach 126 individual stores in addition to distribution centers and scores of food drives each week - almost impossible without computer scheduling.

Besides New York, some larger food banks, including St. Mary's and, not surprisingly, Silicon Valley's Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, have already embraced technology. The problem, Lutz says, has been making it widespread, standardized and

interconnected.

For Nageotte, it can't come soon enough. In September, Food Lifeline received all new computers and enterprise management software - a huge change, she said, from years of making do.

"We had a cobbled-together system - some new computers, some old, some worked well, some were barely limping," she said. Records were in five separate databases "and none of them talk to one another."

Athena, she and others say, opens a world of possibilities:

- GPS tracking and instant communication to send trucks on the most efficient routes. Lutz says this alone can cut transportation costs by 40 percent. Food Lifeline is equipping drivers with smart phones that eventually could scan in donations as they are picked up.
- Inventory management systems to track every food item, from truckloads of potatoes to individually donated cans. This not only saves time and reduces waste, but is a safeguard for product recalls.
- Generating lists of food, money and volunteer hours for donors, handy at tax time.
- Common software and backup computer servers, allowing agencies to trade or divert food, share donor information or step in if a food bank is overwhelmed by a disaster.

Such innovations aid a strategy that "needs to be twofold," she says. "It needs to be about feeding the people who are standing in line better and it needs to be about making the line shorter."

On the Net:

Feeding America: <http://feedingamerica.org>

Food Lifeline: <http://www.foodlifeline.org>

North Texas Food Bank: <http://www.ntfb.org>

Food Bank For New York City: <http://www.foodbanknyc.org>

St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance: <http://www.firstfoodbank.org>

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties:
<http://www.secondharvestfood.org>

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