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Heights Food Center moves to new location to feed the hungry

By Lisa Davidson Herald correspondent Jul 13, 2018

With a well-stocked fridge and pantry, it is hard to imagine that there are others who are hungry every day. But lacking food is reality for many. The Harker Heights Food Center helps those in need by providing everyday groceries.

"If you need the food pantry, you will find us. If you don't use the food pantry, you probably don't even know we exist," said Elizabeth Berkhoudt, director of outreach of the HHFC.

Due to space limitations and a redirecting ministry at the First Baptist Church, the HHFC moved to the Harker Heights United Methodist Church at 208 W. Cardinal Lane in June.

"We were looking for an organization that would accept us and include us in a ministry," Berkhoudt said. "When we are doing more than 70 home deliveries to shut-ins, these people need companionship, they need company, they need human interaction."

The Rev. Jannette Miller, Harker Heights United Methodist Church's pastor, is happy to have an opportunity to help.

"We think this is what Jesus has called us to do as a church," she said. "There is very specific scripture that says feeding the hungry is a Kingdom priority, as is hospitality to the stranger."

The Harker Heights United Methodist Church relocated its youth room and a Sunday classroom to create the new home of the city's food bank.

"It means an opportunity to show the love of Christ to our community members and it helps us to get out of ourselves," Miller said. "We have plenty of space; we could even expand a little if we need to."

Berkhoudt noted there are many ways to get into an unexpected food crisis.

"It could be anyone," she said. "We have grandparents who suddenly have grandbabies coming to them, we have people who have their houses burned down or relocated here from somewhere else and haven't gotten a paycheck. And then we have people whose retirement stipends don't go far enough."

According to an estimation by the U.S. Census Data Bureau, Harker Heights has a population of over 31,000. The HHFC website states that one out of every five locals lives below the poverty level and has difficulty meeting his basic nutritional needs.

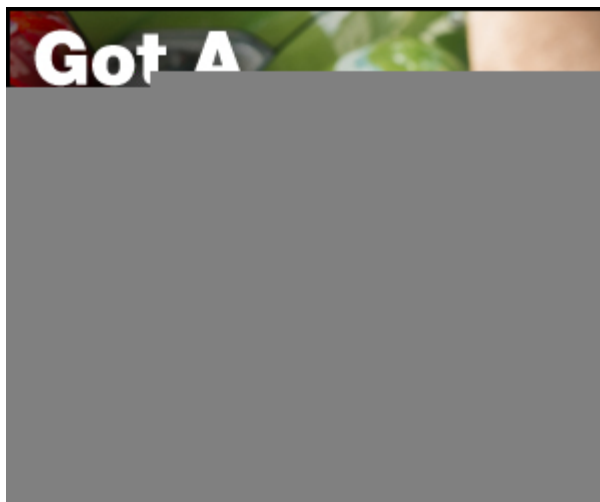
"If everyone ... gave a dollar a year ... to the food pantry, we could feed all the hungry families in Harker Heights for one year," Berkhoudt said. "That's ... a sad reality."

People in need can register on site. A picture ID for every person being claimed in the household as well as a utility bill or rental agreement for proof of residency in Bell County is requested. Recipients must match USDA standards for supplemental nutritious assistance.

"Based on the number of people in their family, they get so many cans of beans, so many boxes of pasta, so many cans of vegetables, so many packages of meat," Berkhoudt said. "We let them choose what they want to feed their family."

The HHFC opens its doors on the first, third and fourth Saturday of the month from 8 a.m. to noon. Clients must be signed in by 11.30 a.m. to receive same-day assistance.

Harker Heights is located at the boarder of a USDA-defined food desert, where inhabitants are more than walking distance away from fresh produce. Therefore, the HHFC also provides the community with fresh produce every Thursday from 9 to 11 a.m.



Besides groceries, the city's food bank also provides recipes and tips on meal planning for their community.

"I actually trained as a chef in Italy, I can help people stretch their food dollars," Berkhoudt said. "The Mediterranean diet goes a long way toward creating complex protein without having meat on the table every night."

While the food center receives generous donations from Walmart and H-E-B, Berkhoudt assured "anybody is welcome to donate."

"We are a small community; we ought to be able to take care of those in need," she said. "You are probably living around the corner from someone who is food-insecure."

However, even more important than donating food is donating one's time.

"If you can spend 30 minutes and deliver one box to a shut-in and ... talk to them about what is going on in the outside world ... you will get that special Christmas feeling that you get when you give someone a gift every week," Berkhoudt said.

Interested volunteers can register at the HHFC at 208 W. Cardinal Lane. Donations can be brought directly to the food bank or made online at <http://www.hhfoodcenter.net>.

In addition, the Harker Heights United Methodist Church provides lunch every Wednesday from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to come out, socialize, have a good meal, make friends and network," Berkhoudt said.