

20th annual Food Drive

It's in the bag



Top: Dan Newman of Snohomish County, WA Branch 791

Above: Ealine Conaway from New Orleans Branch 124

Over the last two decades, letter carriers have made the second Saturday in May a special day in the fight against hunger in America. And this year, Saturday, May 12 was no exception.

For the 20th annual National “Stamp Out Hunger” Food Drive, NALC members representing more than 1,400 of the union’s branches worked alongside thousands of family members and volunteers from the other craft unions and from postal management to pick up bag after bag of non-perishable food that postal customers had left by their mailboxes. The NALC’s effort is the largest single-day food drive in the country.

“It’s sad that widespread hunger is still a problem in the richest country in the world,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said, “but our spirits get a real lift from knowing that our annual effort to fight this ongoing problem makes a difference in our communities.”

Rolando joined Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine and other Headquarters staff members to help Fredericksburg, VA Branch 685’s members and volunteers collect and sort food picked up throughout the historic town about an hour’s drive south of Washington, DC.

The national drive began in 1992, and since then, letter carriers and volunteers throughout America use this special Saturday to help restock food pantry shelves. It’s an especially timely event, since food donations typically peak during the winter holidays and food pantries usually are depleted by Memorial Day weekend. Complicating matters is the fact that free or reduced-cost meals for the children of families in need only are available while school is in session, which means these families often face greater hardship once summer vacation begins.

In 2011, carriers collected 70.2 million pounds of food, a sum that boosted the grand total of collections over the drive’s history to more than 1.1 billion pounds. (Final totals from this year’s drive were due after this magazine went to press, and a more detailed report will appear in the August edition.)

Early reports

Our annual drive occurred in the nick of time in many places across America—for example, in Springfield, MA, whose Emergency Food Pantry reported that it was down to its last few cans of food the week leading up to Saturday, May 12. WWLP-TV reported that thanks to the Saturday drive, letter carriers collected an estimated 180,000 pounds of food donated by people along mail routes.

“We were down to about 10 pounds per person given in our boxes, and our usual weight is 35 pounds a person,” Pantry Director Candace Larger said. “Now, we’ll be able to go back up to what we usually give.”

“It’s the largest single day for food donations collected during the year,” Burlington, NC Branch 2262 carrier Tucretia Loy told the *Times-News*, adding that her county does a good job with collections. The event helped collect 28,000 pounds of food and other essential items last year in Alamance County, and Loy said that this year’s event would likely exceed last year’s results.

West Texas Food Bank Executive Director Augie Fernandes called this year’s “Stamp Out Hunger” drive a great success, telling Odessa’s KOSA-TV that his organization estimated collections of more than 100,000 pounds of food, which would go to help the hungry in the 22 counties the bank serves.

“For me, it was a no-brainer,” Odessa resident Michelle Martin told the TV station. “I really appreciated our Postal Service workers making it so easy to donate. I mean, geez! They gave us the paper sack, then picked it up the next day. Can’t get much easier than that!”

Southwest Missouri Branch 366 Food Drive Coordinator Tony Wills noted that the May 2011 tornado that devastated Joplin also destroyed the part of town that had included some of the food drive’s best contributors, but he told *The Joplin Globe* that other sections of Joplin as well as other towns stepped up this year.

“We were expecting it to be way low, but the people responded very well,” Wills said, adding that the 35,400 pounds of food collected by Joplin-area carriers represented an increase of more than 3,000 pounds over last year’s total.



Top: New Jersey Merged Branch 38 letter carrier Chris Strasser

Above: Members of Chicago Branch 11

Below: Jericho Tabor and his daughter help out at the Minneapolis Branch 9 drive.

Redlands, CA, Mayor Pete Aguilar helped Garden Grove, Branch 1100 letter carrier Darrell Jefferies collect food along Jefferies’ route on that Saturday morning. “The letter carriers reached out to me and asked if I wanted to participate,” Aguilar told the *San Bernardino Sun*. “This is such a great cause. The food collected is staying locally and is going to Redlands Family Services, so it’s important that we show our support.”

“It feels good just to know you’re helping out,” Jefferies added. “After talking with the food banks, they tell us usually around this time of year they are running out of food, so it helps them restock through at least September.”

Food collected by Zion, IL, carriers gets distributed among three local food pantries, including Our Lady of Humility Parish’s food bank, which serves about 125 families per month. “Everything that people give is very much appreciated,” food bank director Luana Petta told the *Lake County News-Sun*. “There’s a lot of people out there that need the food right now.”





Top: South Florida Branch 1071's Danielle Reasor celebrates after a successful day.

Above: Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa helps carry donations for Branch 24.

Below: Philadelphia Branch 157 members put it all together.

"It doesn't really add that much time to the time it takes to deliver the mail," Zion Branch 825 carrier Mike Berger added. Noting that the drive sometimes occurs on the day before Mother's Day, he quipped, "What better gift for a mother than giving a mother food for her hungry children?"

Helping hands

"While letter carriers have led this annual effort," Rolando said, "we clearly cannot take it on alone, which is why we're so thankful for the help we get from our volunteers as well as our national sponsors."

This year, those sponsors were the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, Campbell Soup Company, Valpak, the Postal Service, United Way, AFL-CIO, Feeding America, Uncle Bob's Self Storage and AARP.

"After 20 years of practice, we think

we've finally got it right," Rolando joked, noting how each sponsor plays a special role in the food drive effort.

Publicity ahead of time plays a crucial part in the drive's success, and no one understands that better than Campbell's and Valpak. Both

companies help keep letter carriers busy ahead of the drive—with Campbell's providing 75 million postcards for mailing and Valpak putting food drive announcements on the front of 40 million of its instantly recognizable blue coupon mailers. Also, AARP provided promotional articles and advertisements in its membership magazine—not to mention that its "Drive to End Hunger" logo appears prominently on the side of NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon's No. 24 Chevy Impala.

Another form of assistance—and publicity—that's proving more popular and effective with each passing year is the use of specially branded "Stamp Out Hunger" bags. AARP, International Paper, the Publix grocery store chain and Campbell's together provided more than a million specially marked bags in key locations across America.

For the first time this year, the NALC and its food drive partners all used social networks to spread word about the drive via Facebook and Twitter. In fact, the Twitter hashtag #StampOutHunger reportedly was trending in several communities across the country as users of that service re-posted ("retweeted") reminders to their followers to set out food for pickup. For example, food drive celebrity spokesperson Nick Cannon, host of "America's Got Talent," posted a number messages about the food drive to his 3.5 million Twitter followers.

And while LLVs and rural carriers' vehicles help carry the collected food back to post offices, someone has to haul the thousands of pounds of non-perishable goods to food banks and pantries—and that's where Uncle Bob's steps in, by donating its fleet of rental trucks to do the job in the areas the company serves.

As was mentioned earlier, next month's magazine will contain President Rolando's report to the 68th Biennial Convention in Minneapolis, so the complete list of branch food drive totals, as well as recognition of the top-collecting branches and numerous photos from across the country, will appear in the August edition of *The Postal Record*. ☒

