

# Local support leads to food drive's national success

**F**or nearly a quarter of a century, through the Letter Carriers' "Stamp Out Hunger" Food Drive, letter carriers across America have volunteered their time and effort on the second Saturday in May to help tackle the ongoing problem of hunger in this country.

"Aside from delivering the mail, the food drive is one of the most meaningful things we do as letter carriers," NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

And once again this year—on Saturday, May 9—thousands of active NALC members, joined by countless throngs of retired letter carriers and volunteers, not only went about their daily rounds to deliver mail and parcels, but also picked up bags and boxes of non-perishable food ultimately destined for local food banks in more than 10,000 cities and towns in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and the District of Columbia.

"There are a lot of people out there right now that have problems getting something to eat," New Bern, NC Branch 780 letter carrier David Elliott told WCTI-TV on Food Drive Day. "We want to be able to help take care of the problem."

## Lending a hand

President Rolando expressed his gratitude on behalf of the NALC to the letter carriers from the more than 1,300 branches that took part this year, and also to the U.S. Postal Service and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, both of which served as national food drive sponsors.

"It is truly amazing to see the level of cooperation," Rolando said, "not just between labor and management, but among all of the postal employee crafts, coming together to provide a way for millions of our customers to do something to help curb the continuing problem of hunger in America."

The first national drive took place on May 15, 1993, with a goal of having at least one NALC branch in each of the 50 states participating. The result then? More than 11 million pounds of food was collected—a one-day record in the United States—with more than 220 union branches involved.

Final official results of this year's campaign were scheduled to be announced by June 12, and a complete

report on the drive, including branch-by-branch weight totals and photos, will appear in the July issue. The final reports mailed by branches to NALC Headquarters will be used to determine recognition in *The Postal Record* for the top branches in each of 10 membership categories.

One of the reasons springtime was picked for Food Drive Day was because, by then, food bank stocks tend to start dwindling.

"As soon as school lets out, our need for assistance increases, because kids are home [from school] now," Community Food Bank's Lou Medran told Tucson's KVOA-TV. "So mom and dad are now having to come up with a couple more meals a day that they didn't have to."

Medran said that the food drive is a particularly good draw for food donations, compared with Tucson's two-week winter holiday festival, which usually nets about 45,000 pounds of food.

"In a single day on this drive, through all the efforts of Tucson and Southern Arizona, we're trying to get over 300,000 pounds," Medran said. "So it's a major deal." (Last year, Tucson Branch 704 collected 316,340 pounds of food.)

The weather on Food Drive Day often plays a significant role in determining the success at the local level. Many letter carriers this year had warm sunshine and blue skies, while some encountered various levels of rainfall. Carriers and residents throughout Texas and Oklahoma, meanwhile, had to deal with tornado-producing storms that weekend, while an early-May surprise snowfall brought with it some logistical problems for letter carriers from Colorado to the Dakotas.







Los Angeles, CA Br. 24



South Florida Br. 1071

Even so, Rapid City, SD Branch 1225 President Richard Hatzenbuehler told KEVN-TV that his letter carriers were ready for the challenge, and they were prepared to pick up food from customers for several days after Saturday, May 9, should snow continue to stick around.

“The Post Office has the perfect network to do this,” Hatzenbuehler said. “We reach every household in the United States.”

A different type of weather threat was on the mind of Panama City, FL Branch 3367’s Linda Kelley, who told WJHG-TV that one of the things the food drive does is it helps to stock food pantries ahead of possible natural disasters.

“Hurricanes and tornados blow through, and groups like Salvation Army and Catholic Charities step up to help feed people whose homes have been lost,” Kelley said. “The demand is real and larger than ever.”

Meanwhile, it was warm and sunny across much of Iowa, and that seemed to have helped to boost food contributions in some locales.

“Last year was a little on the lower side,” Mason City, IA Branch 471 letter carrier Tom Teeter told the *Mason City Globe Gazette*. “Because of the perfect weather this year, we think we’ll do more.”

### Raising awareness

A big concern for the 2015 food drive was whether letter carriers would be able to effectively remind customers to leave food by their mailboxes on Saturday, May 9.

“In the past, we’ve had one national sponsor who funded the entire order of reminder postcards,” NALC Community and Membership Outreach Coordinator Pam Donato said. “We didn’t have that

this year, so we had a bit of a last-minute scramble to make sure cards could get printed and mailed out on time.”

Fortunately, longtime national sponsor Valpak was able to defray some of the postcard production costs, while NALC Headquarters, scores of branches and the food bank affiliates of national sponsor Feeding America also chipped in to help pay for these crucial reminders as well. USPS once again provided postage for the cards through the use of the G-10 permit.

“Unfortunately, there were a few hiccups in the postcard process this year,” Donato said, “but in the end, nearly every branch that asked for cards got them.”

Specially branded food drive bags also continued to serve as an effective medium for spreading word about the drive.

“Bags have the powerful effect of doubling and potentially tripling the amount of food we collect,” Donato said. “Every layer of messaging about our food drive translates into collecting more food. But bags delivered to each address have the most significant and dramatic effect on total food collection.”

In many areas, fellow unions such as the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), United Mine Workers (UMW) and International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) sponsored union-produced paper or biodegradable plastic bags for distribution to postal customers. Other unions helping out in a similar fashion included the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the American Society of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT)—not to mention the AFL-CIO, another national food drive sponsor.



Elsewhere, some regional grocery store chains became bag sponsors, such as Food Lion in Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas. Publix Supermarkets stepped up once again this year by donating nearly 26 million Stamp Out Hunger bags that were mailed out (again under the G-10 permit) to postal customers throughout the six-state Southwest region it serves.

### An ongoing problem

“It’s a sad reality that hunger continues to affect so many people in America,” President Rolando said. “About 49 million people around the country, including millions of children and senior citizens, aren’t sure where their next meal is coming from. And one in four households with a member currently serving in the U.S. military turns to the Feeding America network for food assistance.”

Joyce Jacobs of Southwest Florida’s Harry Chapin Food Bank told Fort Myers’ *The News-Press* that the face of hunger is shifting.

“We’re seeing more seniors where one spouse passes away and the other one is living on a single Social Security check,” Jacobs said. “We’re also seeing vets in need. Because of aging or health reasons, they can’t get work.”

In West Springfield, MA, Parish Cupboard’s Martha Tighe told WWLP-TV





Carmel, IN Br. 888

Athens, GA Br. 588



that the food drive is big for her operation, which serves about 200 families each month. “We get it into our cellar, and into our pantry, and it really gives us enough canned food to get through the summer,” Tighe said.

“We look forward to this day,” Catholic Action Center’s Ginny Ramsey told Lexington, KY’s WKYT-TV, adding that the Stamp Out Hunger food drive usually provides enough food for more than 75 percent of her food bank’s supply.

“Anyone donating has the pleasure of knowing the food is going to one of their neighbors, someone that is in need,” Milwaukee’s Hunger Task Force Executive Director Sherrie Tussler told WDJT-TV. “My dad was a letter carrier, so I know how hard he worked and I know what it means to add a ton, literally, of food that he has to pick up.”

Since the national drive began in 1992, customer generosity has resulted in letter carriers collecting and delivering to local food banks more than 1.3 billion pounds of non-perishable food. Last year’s drive resulted in the collection of nearly 73 million pounds.

“A thousand pounds or 20,000 pounds—somebody’s not going to go to bed hungry,” Yakima, WA Branch

854 letter carrier Jeff Bohlinger told KIMA-TV. Officials at Yakima’s Union Gospel Mission told *Benchmark Reporter* that this year’s drive went so well, they were on track to run out of boxes to package food.

“The extra work is well worth it, because we know we’re giving back to the community,” Joplin, MO Branch 366 letter carrier Tony Willis told KOAM-TV. “It’s an opportunity for our customers to donate to food banks without actually having to drive it down there.”

Sid Melton, who works for Joplin’s We Care of the Four States, appreciates the different kinds of food the drive brings in. “When we get corporate donations, it’s usually a pallet of something,” he told KOAM-TV. “But the variety that comes in, in this kind of a food drive, lets us have a greater variety of things to offer our clients.”

### Ups and downs

It can be typical for food donations at the branch level to be up one year and down the next, for a variety of reasons. In 2014, for example, letter carriers in Hazelton, PA, collected about 11.5 tons of food; this year, the drive had generated approximately eight tons of non-perishables.

“The economy in the Hazelton area is still pretty rough,” United Way of Greater Hazelton’s Pat Ward told *The Standard Speaker*.

Ultimately, though, it’s the ability to feed those customers in need that drives letter carriers to collect as much as they can—regardless of how the grand total at the end of the day stacks up with totals from previous years.

Emporia, KS Branch 185 city carrier assistant Tim Dugan told the *Emporia Gazette* that he had to unload his LLV twice on Saturday, May 9. “This is my second food drive event,” Dugan said. “It’s a very busy day but, by far, my favorite day of the year.”

### Helping hands

In addition to USPS, the NRLCA, the AFL-CIO, Feeding America and Valpak, President Rolando also thanked the other national sponsors—United Way Worldwide and Valassis—for their ongoing support of the food drive.

He also thanked members of the Feeding America Entertainment Council—actor Betsy Brandt and celebrity chefs Rocco DiSpirito, Alex Guarnaschelli and Carla Hall—who each provided video messages leading up to Saturday, May 9, to encourage their millions of followers on Facebook and Twitter to support the drive.

But Rolando said that even with all of this national support, the food drive’s effectiveness ultimately comes down to the solidarity of letter carriers.

“As we’ve seen time and again, our successes are connected to the level of activism and engagement of our local branch leaders and our rank-and-file members who work together to achieve a goal,” Rolando said.

“We’ve also demonstrated on many occasions how letter carriers can solve all sorts of problems,” he said. “And year after year, our efforts to help ‘stamp out hunger’—one bag at a time, one delivery point at a time—add up to prove that point in a big and noticeable way.” **PR**