

Local work is key to Food Drive success

While national-level preparations are full-steam ahead for the 23rd annual Letter Carriers' "Stamp Out Hunger" Food Drive on Saturday, May 9, some of the hardest work taking place ahead of America's largest one-day food drive is happening on the ground at branches across the country.

"What makes this drive truly successful, year after year, is the amount of effort our food drive volunteers put in to help bring in as much food as possible," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "Rather than taking a well-deserved rest after a full day of delivering the mail, countless men and women in branches large and small spend untold hours working out the local logistics necessary to conduct a successful food drive so generous customers can help those in need."

Letter carriers visit every address in America at least six days a week, so we are acutely aware of how hunger affects the communities we serve. Driven by a desire to do something about this problem, and inspired by the success that a number of branches had experienced with local food drives, in the early 1990s the NALC worked with the Postal Service to come up with a national food-collection campaign.

The drive's traditional second Saturday in May was chosen because, by then, food charities are beginning to see their stocks run low after the dramatic spike in donations that traditionally comes during the November-to-December winter holiday season. Last May, letter carriers and dedicated volunteers helped collect almost 73 million pounds of non-perishable food, bringing the total to more than 1.3 billion pounds of food collected since the national drive began in 1992.

"Our food drive is a clear demonstration of the power of solidarity," Rolando said. "It starts with the individual letter

carrier, who not only delivers the mail as usual on Food Drive Day, but also voluntarily collects the often heavy bags of non-perishable food that get left by our patrons' mailboxes."

All of that picked-up food then gets sorted by volunteers at the carrier's local office before it's hauled off to nearby food banks and food pantries. It's a full day's work that benefits from the weeks of up-front preparations made by the branch food drive coordinator, who is responsible for making sure that advance word about the drive is spread far and wide, for drumming up support for it and for recruiting enough volunteers to help out.

New challenges ahead

Besides the Postal Service, other national sponsors for this year's food drive are the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, Feeding America, United Way Worldwide and the AFL-CIO.

In the past, the food drive has been helped by the support of a national sponsor that could foot the bill for the nationally distributed Food Drive Day reminder postcards upon which many customers have grown to depend.

This year, however, no such sponsor has come forward.

"Throughout our history, letter carriers have become experts at meeting challenges head-on," Rolando said, "and I have no doubt whatsoever that we will pull together this year and overcome this particular problem."

NALC has agreed to help pay for the costs of printing a number of postcards, and thanks to the efforts of the non-profit Feeding America, many local food banks also have agreed to kick in what they can for postcard production as well. (See NALC Director of Community Services Pam Donato's report on page 12.) But even with this outpouring of timely support, it

remains uncertain whether every address in America will receive a reminder postcard this year.

Another challenge that a lot of local branches face from year to year is securing sponsors for special food drive bags, and 2015 is no different.

"Far and away, specially marked food drive bags generate the biggest collections," Donato said. "Customers love getting the reminder postcards, but nothing beats a bag that practically screams, 'Fill me up and set me outside!'"

The food drive's online toolkit, available at nalc.org/food, provides local and regional coordinators with a wealth of resources to help make soliciting sponsorships for postcards and bags a little easier. The toolkit contains downloadable templates suitable for use by professional bag and card producers, as well as tips that coordinators can use for help in identifying and encouraging local sponsorships.

"One survey after another has shown that Americans love their letter carriers and consider them the most trusted government employees," Donato said. "Regional and local businesses alike can benefit from that goodwill when they pay to have their logos placed on food drive postcards or bags—and in turn, our hungriest customers can benefit from the increase in food donations that these promotional materials can bring."

The food drive toolkit also provides the ever-popular artwork provided by "Family Circus" cartoonist Jeff Keane, national partner logos, and portable document file (PDF) versions of the official food drive posters and flyers. There's also a form provided by the Frank Doolittle Company for ordering union- and American-made food drive T-shirts, hats, buttons, signs and more.

Check out the toolkit for plenty of other resources, such as certificate templates, the official coordinators'

manual, and letters of support from national food drive partners and sponsors. Practically no day goes by that the toolkit web page isn't updated, so be sure to check back often for links to new or updated resources.

A persistent problem

Studies by national food drive partner Feeding America reinforce what letter carriers see on our routes all too frequently: that hunger still exists in just about every community in the nation, from urban city centers, throughout suburbs, and across rural America. In fact, one in six people struggle to get enough to eat, and one in seven are forced to go to one of Feeding America's food banks.

Another sad reality is that African-Americans are more than twice as likely as their white, non-Latino counterparts to suffer from food insecurity—uncertainty about where food for their next meal will come from. And for Latinos, food insecurity has nearly doubled in the past decade, with Latino communities disproportionately hurt by a combination of food insecurity, poverty and unemployment.

Food insecurity is harmful to all people, regardless of race, but senior citizens face a number of unique medical and mobility challenges that put them at a greater risk of hunger.

Going hungry can be devastating for children, too.

"The numbers are staggering," Postmaster General Megan Brennan wrote in her letter of support for this year's drive, "with more than 49 million Americans, including 1 in 5 children, at risk of hunger. Studies have shown that lack of adequate nutrition affects cognitive and behavioral development in children.

"We'll continue to encourage all postal employees across the country

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to support the food drive," Brennan wrote. "Working together, we will continue to make a difference in the lives of millions of Americans in need."

It's personal

Every day of the year, letter carriers are on the job delivering America's mail and packages, President Rolando said. "But on that special second Saturday in May, we work extra hard to get the job done and to help take away some of our customers' suffering."

And it ties back to the idea that solidarity is power, he said.

"The food drive really starts with one bag of food, left by a generous patron's mailbox, and then that patron's letter

carrier picks it up as part of his or her normal rounds," the president said. "Put those individual efforts together, and it's not hard to figure out how we can collect millions of pounds of food each year.

"It's important to remember that everyone who will participate in the food drive this year on Saturday, May 9, is a volunteer," Rolando said. "No one is required to do it, but I am thankful that thousands of us will once again take on this awesome responsibility because we want to, because we know how it raises our status in the communities we serve, and because of the feeling of pride and accomplishment we get by doing it." **PR**