Hess Teams with Houston Charity to Fight Waste, Hunger

By Noreen Seebacher

HOUSTON — Who wouldn’t jump at the chance to eliminate waste and improve efficiency, and help the community at the same time?

So when the Food Services team at Hess Tower learned of an opportunity to simultaneously reduce waste and feed the hungry, the answer was an enthusiastic "yes."

"It's really a win-win, solving the problems of hunger and excess prepared food at the same time. And It feels great to connect good food with people who are struggling to feed themselves and their families," said Randy Fournier, Manager of Global Dining and Food Safety at Hess.

Every month, Hess donates about 700 pounds of leftover prepared food — everything from soup and pasta to bread and vegetables — to Second Servings of Houston.

While that sounds like a lot of food — and it is — it translates to about 35 pounds per workday. "Keep in mind that a single gallon of soup weighs between eight and nine pounds," Fournier said.

Founded in 2014 by Barbara Heitman Bronstein, Second Servings is Houston's only prepared food rescue organization. The organization picks up excess prepared food from regulated food businesses — from corporate facilities like Hess to hotels, arenas and special events.

"It's a simple concept with a simple solution," Bronstein said. "Many of the people being served are children and working adults earning minimum wage, who need assistance to make ends meet."

The food that Hess donates goes to Magnificat Houses, an independent Houston charity that has been serving homeless people, disadvantaged people and people with mental illness since 1968. The organization's soup kitchen serves 75,000 lunches annually to hungry people in Houston — six days a week, no questions asked.

"The organization really looks forward to the Hess donations," Bronstein said.

According to the latest USDA report, about one in six Texas households are food insecure; that is, they struggle to avoid hunger. Texas is one of just 14 states with higher food insecurity than the nation overall (17 percent versus 14 percent).

In Houston’s Harris County alone, more than 800,000 people or about one in five households face food insecurity, Bronstein said. So it just makes sense to redirect "perfectly edible surplus food away from the landfill to the people who really need it," she continued.

Fournier wholeheartedly agrees. In fact, about 10 years ago, Hess worked with another organization that collected leftover food from dining halls at the old headquarters at One Allen Center. However, that organization eventually stopped those efforts, leaving Hess with no viable way to share the excess food.

Prepared food has to be properly handled and stored to protect its quality, Fournier explained, as well as distributed to people in need. In 2012, the Houston City Council approved an ordinance establishing a voluntary program to coordinate outdoor food service operations for the homeless.

The ordinance requires, among other things, registration of the formal or informal food service organization, food handling training and coordination of location and times of food service to maximize the distribution of food throughout the week.
Bronstein created Second Servings to bridge the needs of the population in Houston and the regulatory requirements created to protect them. A former marketer for some of America’s leading brands including Unilever, Mars and Coca-Cola, she piloted a banquet food rescue program known as "Banquet Bounty for the Hungry" in 2013.

After 18 months, that effort evolved to Second Servings of Houston. "We consulted the Houston Food Bank, various food experts, and the City Health Department, became certified in safe food handling, and founded Second Servings of Houston, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization," she said.

Hess got involved with Second Servings late last year after Seth Silverman, a Hess Senior Production Engineering Advisor, casually asked Fournier what the company did with the excess food in the company dining facilities each day.

Bronstein is a friend of his wife’s, he explained, adding, "It just sounded like a great idea and a good thing for Hess to support."

Fournier said he’s been impressed with the organization and its professionalism. Second Servings picks up excess prepared food at Hess on a weekly basis. The organization supplies the pans and labels, schedules the pickups, and transports the food in refrigerated trucks directly to an approved charitable meal provider.

Bronstein said every city has a lot of surplus prepared food, as well as a lot of need. Connecting the two "is a good thing for the recipients and a good thing for the businesses providing the food."

"No one likes to throw good food away. It’s a morale booster for everyone involved with the food preparation to know that the food will be rescued and reused. It’s also an image enhancer for the businesses who participate in the program," she said.

It all creates less waste and more dignity … for struggling people who can now get through the day without feeling hungry.