

Hayward produce stand sets up outside Alameda County Social Services office

By Rebecca Parr *The Daily Review Contra Costa Times*

Posted:

TimesHeraldOnline.com

HAYWARD -- Healthy apples, broccoli and lettuce have just become more readily available to Alameda County Social Services clients, a group that often lacks access to the array of nutritious food sold in supermarkets, which are rarer in low-income neighborhoods.

Making good food available is a key reason the weekly Farm Stand opened outside the Amador Street county building in December. The pilot project is a collaboration between Social Services and Dig Deep Farms and Produce to encourage low-income residents to eat nutritious food.

"We know if we provide healthy food at a reasonable price that's easily accessible, our clients and staff will take advantage of it," said Sylvia A. Soublet, spokeswoman for Social Services.

The staff seems to be on board. On Thursday, the stand was doing a brisk business, with many of the shoppers wearing county ID badges. Tangerines were going fast, and mangos were popular.

"They sent out an email, and it sounded like a really great thing," said Adrienne Danehy Oakes, an Alameda County employee picking out tangerines at the stand. "It's hard to get to the farmers market during the week when you're working."

Those qualifying for CalFresh, the state's food-stamp program, can buy the produce using their Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, which are similar to bank debit cards. The stand also accepts credit cards and cash.

"The stand has been extremely well-received, and we're getting a good mix of county staff, folks who happened to be walking by and didn't know we were offering fresh produce, and our clients," Soublet said.

Many of the Hayward office visitors live in food deserts, she said, referring to urban areas, usually low-income, that lack supermarkets. People stopping by the stand for the first time pick one or two things, said Yani Bunch of Dig Deep. "They tend to buy things that are easily edible," he said. "We're hoping that once people know we're here, they'll begin to do their grocery shopping with us."

Dig Deep, a project of the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs' Activities League, grows some of the produce sold at the Farm Stand on its plots in Cherryland, Ashland and unincorporated San Leandro, and buys the rest from other farmers, said Hilary Bass, program specialist with the sheriff's office.

"We try to offer a wide variety of products for our clients," she said. "We have about 20 different products -- greens, lettuce, sweet potatoes, onions, apples, avocados, broccoli."

Recipe cards give cooking tips, and the Farm Stand has cooking demonstrations, Soublet said. "We're also hoping to expand to include prepared food. We heard from the staff they want hummus, for instance. But that's further down the road."

Alameda County sheriff's Lt. Marty Neideffer helped start Dig Deep in 2010 to provide healthy produce

and jobs, especially for those who have served jail time. Not everyone who works at Dig Deep has been incarcerated, but those with criminal records are not automatically rejected.

"Having a job is one of the best crime prevention tactics we can have," Bass said. Dig Deep hired two welfare clients to help run its stands at the county buildings, bringing the number of employees to 10.

The Social Services Agency and Dig Deep will open two more stands, one at its North Oakland office at 2000 San Pablo Ave. on Feb. 14 and another at Eastmont Town Center in East Oakland on Feb. 24, Soublet said.

Dig Deep also runs a produce stand Mondays at its greenhouse on East 14th Street in Ashland and at the Alameda County Library in Fremont. On Tuesday, it is starting one at St. Rose Hospital in South Hayward.

Farm Stand prices are a third of what Whole Foods charges, said Alexis Stavropoulos, crew leader at Dig Deep.

On Thursday, apples and broccoli were \$1.50 a pound, lettuce \$1 a head, greens and cauliflower \$2 and potatoes 75 cents a pound.

"We don't want it to be expensive. We want it be affordable to those using EBT cards," Stavropoulos said.

"Our whole mission is to incorporate local fresh food into a community that is underserved and has little access to nutritious food."

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