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Meal service location in flux: Samaritan House sets up temporary outdoor location at King Center

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More than 180 people, some fresh from work, some without a home and many with children, arrive at Monte Diablo Avenue in the early evening to wait for a warm meal and a kind smile from Samaritan House volunteers.

The charitable organization based in San Mateo has had to move its nightly dining services from an indoor facility to temporarily serving to-go meals at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center. It is now trying to find a nearby location that will allow it to provide clients with hospitable facilities.

The incredible attendance during Tuesday's first meal service at the King Center was proof of the community's need for food assistance, said Laura Bent, director of programs and services at Samaritan House. People started lining up at 4:30 p.m. for its 5 p.m. opening; within 20 minutes it ran out of its 180 premade chicken, rice and vegetable dinners, Bent said.



Samaritan House clients receive their warm meals to go after the organization lost the use of an indoor facility.

Samaritan House provides more than 2,800 free meals every month to those in the community with its Monday through Friday, 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. dining service, said Marcy Spiker, communications specialist at Samaritan House. For more than 17 years, Samaritan House was able to provide its clients with indoor seating at the Westside Church, Bent said.

Luckily, San Mateo's Park and Recreation Department stepped up and temporarily placed Samaritan House at the King Center when the church made alternate plans for the facility, Bent said. Samaritan House is unable to use the indoor portion of the King Center because there are other events scheduled during the week, Spiker said. Although grateful to have only moved across the street, the lack of an indoor seating area is a detriment to its clients, Bent said.

The seating area provided clients with opportunities to socialize; it was like a family, said Mario Cousenes, a Samaritan House cook who's been involved with the organization for more than 24 years.

Larry Andrews lives nearby and has been attending the dinner service for six years. Having facilities that encouraged human contact was a social gift, Andrews said. Although it was only for an hour, not having an indoor dining room will be a hardship on Samaritan House clients, particularly with winter beginning and for those without housing, Andrews said.

"People looked forward to not only a hot dinner, but a warm place to sit," Andrews said.

Jose Ortiz has been involved with and attending Samaritan House's dining services since he was 12 years old. Sadly, many of the clients will end up having to eat their meals on the street, Ortiz said.

Now an adult, Ortiz is in school and works part time. He continues to attend the dining service two to three times a week and volunteers as often as he can, Ortiz said.

People want to give back, Cousenes said. At the indoor facility clients were happy to chip in any way they could by helping to clean up or put away chairs, Cousenes said.

Clients of Samaritan House's food service program are generally working members of the community who struggle to make ends meet with the county's high cost of living, Bent said. Its food service programs help to supplement resources for low-income individuals who already struggle to pay for housing or transportation, Bent said.

“We are bound and determined to find a location in this same area, because of lot of these individuals are walking here. It’s within walking distance and many of them don’t have transportation,” Bent said.

Remaining accessible to clients is the only way for Samaritan House to successfully help those who are in need, Bent said.

Samaritan House cooks all of its meals at its main office and has several other food programs. They have a weekend to-go lunch program that provides an individual with enough food to get through the evening, Cousenes said. There is a mobile meals program, similar to meals-on-wheels, as well as a food pantry that provides low-income families with full boxes of groceries. About 80 percent of its food comes from the Second Harvest Food Bank and the remainder is donated by local grocery stores, Bent said.

Samaritan House offers a range of services to the community. With the assistance from the Peninsula Health Care District and the Sequoia Healthcare District, it offers medical and dental care through its free clinics of San Mateo and Redwood City, Spiker said. It also has the 90 bed Safe Harbor Shelter for the homeless, Bent said.

Cousenes began volunteering with Samaritan House at a young age. He started by driving around and looking for people who needed help. He would take an inventory of what those in the homeless community needed and would return with clothes and sleeping bags, Cousenes said.

“You have to be in their shoes to understand. Some people [in the community] live day by day on their income,” Cousenes said. “But we’re here to help them no matter what.”

Samaritan House is looking for a dining room location that could seat 75 to 100 people. As the holiday season is approaching, it is looking for food donations such as turkeys, chicken and ham to cook and serve through its dining program.

For more information on Samaritan House visit www.samaritanhousesanmateo.org or call (650) 523-0814

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