

## HOLIDAY GIVING » Some local charities have experienced a big drop-off in financial, food donations needed for the year



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Bob Mascolo, left, and Gregory Venegas fill out orders Thursday for clients at Food For Thought in Forestville.

# Food banks getting less

By **MARTIN ESPINOZA**  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Some local food banks and food pantries are reporting fewer donations this year, a trend that's left them wondering if the dollars flowing to national political causes, including campaign contributions made earlier in the year, came at the expense of end-of-year charitable giving for hunger assistance.

At Food For Thought, unrestricted, individual donations since the election on Nov. 8 are down about a third from last year. The nonprofit

provides groceries, canned food, fresh produce and nutritional supplements to Sonoma County residents living with or affected by HIV, AIDS or other serious illnesses.

"In this case, maybe people feel there's going to be more of a need in the political arena," said Ron Karp, Food For Thought's executive director.

The drop contrasts with prior years, including 2008, Karp said, when end-of-year donations increased, most likely because the public perceived a greater need for charity at the outset of the econom-

ic downturn.

Karen Gardner, Food For Thought's development director, said she expected financial donations to drop prior to the election. But the organization did not expect that trend to continue after the election. Food For Thought received \$97,000 in unrestricted gifts between Nov. 8 and Dec. 22, compared to \$143,000 during the same period in 2015.

"There are a lot of unknowns on the horizon, from the fate of

### HOW TO HELP

See online donation sites to contribute

■ Food For Thought, [fftfoundation.org](http://fftfoundation.org)

■ Redwood Empire Food Bank, [refb.org](http://refb.org)

■ Friends in Service Here In Santa Rosa, [www.fish-of-santa-rosa.org](http://www.fish-of-santa-rosa.org)



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Volunteer Jake Jacobs, right, loads up his truck to deliver food to clients of Food For Thought, with the help of his grandson, Cayden Jacobs, 11, in Forestville on Thursday.

## FOOD BANKS

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government assistance programs that impact our clients to general economic stability," Gardner said.

Though macro-economic indicators have improved since the recession, Karp said the cost of living in Sonoma County continues to put a heavy burden on low-income families and individuals, as well as homeless residents and those on the verge of becoming homeless. Those without shelter now comprise 10 percent of Food For Thought's client base, a share that's greater than it's ever been, Karp said.

At Redwood Empire Food Bank, the drop in financial donations has left the region's largest food bank with a budget shortfall of half a million dollars, said David Goodman, the organization's executive director. Goodman called the deficit "alarming" because the run-up to Christmas is when a significant portion of donations are made.

"The day after Christmas, donations taper off dramatically," Goodman said.

The food bank is the largest hunger-relief nonprofit serving the North Coast — from Sonoma County to the Oregon border — raising about \$8.5 million annually. The food bank leverages

those funds to distribute about \$20 million worth of food.

End-of-year donations are crucial for the next year's operations, Goodman said.

"The food that people are eating during the summer is made possible by people's generosity during the previous winter," he said.

But not all hunger-relief organizations are reporting a decline in donations.

Dennis Hansen, deputy director of food pantry Friends in Service Here, or F.I.S.H., in Santa Rosa, said end-of-year donations are on track to meet or exceed last year. Hansen said November saw a 50 percent increase in food donations, which usually exceed 600,000 pounds during the last two months of the year.

F.I.S.H. buys about 20 percent of its food from the Redwood Empire Food Bank and also gets about 1,000 pounds of donated food every day from local grocery stores and markets.

"We've had another good year," said Hansen.

Karp of Food For Thought said hunger is as much an issue now as it was during the recession.

"Obviously the work is as important as it's ever been and hopefully people can balance their giving so they continue to support basic needs as well as other important causes," he said.

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