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SERVING THE COACHELLA VALLEY SINCE 1927

FIND Food Bank gets Feeding America grant



LUCAS ESPOSITO/THE DESERT SUN

Justyn Martinez, 8, sits by a FIND mobile food pantry on July 9 at the Thousand Palms Community Center. In an attempt to reduce malnutrition, FIND Food Bank serves meals to children during the summer.

\$500,000 award to address food insecurity in the Coachella Valley

Kristen Hwang
The Desert Sun

Every year, the number of people who struggle with food insecurity increases in the Coachella Valley and, every year, local nonprofits struggle to find ways to help families in need. But this year, FIND Food Bank, with the help of Feeding America, hopes to change the way local nonprofits are able to help the community.

Feeding America, a national net-

work of food banks, through the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, has awarded FIND Food Bank a \$500,000 grant to study social and economic instability throughout the valley. FIND Food Bank was one of only five food banks across the country to receive the grant. The three-year grant aims to bring nonprofits together to address issues of poverty, housing and job instability, health outcomes and transportation barriers that all contribute to food insecurity.

"Food insecurity is a symptom of the other things. If you're struggling with food, then of course you're going to be struggling with housing, and if you're struggling with housing, you're probably going to be struggling to find a job," said Heather Vaikona, director of community investment at FIND.

About 14 million children live below the poverty line in the U.S. The problem of food insecurity in the valley is

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pressing and growing quickly, Vaikona said.

"In 2009, FIND was serving maybe 50,000 residents per month. This year, we serve 95,000 each month. More than half of Coachella Valley families struggle to make ends meet," she said. "The need is through the roof, and it's continuing to climb."

FIND Food Bank will partner with United Way of the Desert, the Regional Access Project Foundation, the Desert Healthcare District, the Riverside County Economic Development Agency and the University of Southern California's Sol Price School of Public Policy.

During the first year of the grant, USC's School of Public Policy will help FIND Food Bank conduct a needs assessment that looks at what specific issues in the valley affect families' ability to feed themselves. Gary Painter, director of social policy in the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation, will help put together a database to give valley nonprofits a starting point for their work.

"We want to be able to tell the story of economic development, where the jobs are, public safety, how kids are doing in

school and social connectiveness in communities," Painter said.

Painter said bringing nonprofits throughout the valley together and giving them a chance to do evidence-based work was a "new solution to a long-standing problem."

"It's not just one nonprofit working on poverty. It's the recognition that poverty is a multifaceted issue," Painter said.

Vaikona said at the end of the three years, FIND Food Bank and its partner organizations hope to have concrete plans in place to ensure that "every Coachella Valley family (is) healthy, happy and sustaining."

"The valley is interesting because it's beautiful and it's a great place to live, but there's certainly a chasm between wealth and the families struggling to live," Vaikona said.

Together, Palm Springs Unified, Coachella Valley Unified and Desert Sands Unified school districts have more than 71,000 students. Of those students, more than 75 percent of them qualify for free or reduced price meals at school.

In all three school districts, the percentage of needy students is high: 87 percent in CVUSD, 83 percent in PSUSD and 68 percent in DSUSD qualify for free or reduced price

meals.

Food insecurity is such a pressing problem that CVUSD applied for and received Provision 2 of the federal School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program, which allows them to serve meals free to every student during the school year regardless of whether the students qualifies for free or reduced price meals.

Palm Springs Unified has also taken steps to provide as many free meals as possible. Students who qualify for reduced price meals get lunch and supper at no cost.

FIND Food Bank and its partner organizations' work will be based on accountability. The groups will look at whether the economic and social data that USC collects is changing during the three-year grant and will adjust their interventions accordingly.

"Everybody is working their socks off, but sometimes we can't step back and look at what's really going on. We know anecdotally or symptomatically what's happening because we know the people we serve, but sometimes it can be hard to see clearly what the issues are," Vaikona said.

"This will help us respond innovatively to make a real difference."