PHOTO BY AMY SYLVESTRI

Alameda County Food bank volunteer Greg Novacek loads boxes of produce as the food bank prepares for the Thanksgiving rush.

By Amy Sylvestri

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Volunteers were busy loading and unloading trucks full of turkeys, produce, and canned goods this week at the Alameda County Food Bank, making sure everyone gets enough to eat this Thanksgiving.

The donations the food bank receives in November and December make up about half of the total donations they get all year.

“This is our busiest time of the year by far,” said Michael Altfest, the food bank’s spokesperson. “What we get now really determines how the rest of the year goes for us.”

“This is also the busiest time for volunteers,” Altfest explained.” It’s great so many people are helping, but volunteers are another thing we need year-round.”

Altfest said that January and February are the months when volunteers are most scarce but most needed, because a lot of the food that is donated at year's end needs to be sorted and distributed then.

The food bank is located in a large warehouse in Oakland and in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, hundreds of volunteers sort canned goods and fresh vegetables to make up care packages for the 275 Alameda County soup kitchens, shelters, and programs for the needy.

On Monday morning, volunteers from San Leandro High helped out and the UC Berkeley baseball team was expected to take an afternoon shift. Greg Novacek from Lam Research stayed to help out even after his coworkers left for the day.

"It's important to help," said Novacek as he loaded up boxes of produce.

Last year, the bank collected more than 700,000 pounds of food and nearly $200,000 in cash donations during the holidays and they hope to do even more this year.

Altfest said they just received barrels and barrels of food from drives that were sponsored by Safeway and the Boy Scouts last weekend.

A “virtual food drive” on the food bank’s website allows people to shop and choose individual items at an online grocery store and then pay with a credit card, so they can select precisely what they want to give. Altfest says that they can turn each dollar donated that way into four dollars worth of food.

More than half of the food the bank gives out is fresh produce, which they buy from farms at discount with the cash donations they receive. The grocery items they need the most are canned fruits and vegetables, canned meat and fish, peanut butter, pasta and tomato sauce, beans, rice, soups, cereals and powdered milk.

Anyone interested in donating can drop nonperishable foods in one of the 300 barrels that have been placed in grocery stores and other shops all over Alameda County or make an online contribution at the bank’s website (www.accfb.org), or by sending a check to the Alameda County Community Food Bank, P.O. Box 2599, Oakland, CA 94614.

People who need food have to register by calling the bank’s help line, 1(800) 870-FOOD and they can receive food that same day in many cases.