**National Latino Research Center**

**Food Justice Initiative**

**Mobile Food Pantry**

**Prepared by Arcela Nuñez-Alvarez**

Many families in North San Diego County lack regular access to food, especially nutritious food options. The need is especially acute among low-income, farmworker, immigrant, and non-English speaking communities.

**Description**

NLRC began increasing access to healthy food through coordination of the first Mobile Pantry in North San Diego County. In collaboration with Feeding America, The Leichtag Family Foundation, The Bravo Foundation, the Farmworker CARE Coalition, and community leaders or líderes comunitarios of Poder Popular para la Salud del Pueblo, NLRC is facilitating access to food to over $1,000 families in great need.

The Mobile Pantry is part of a wider county-wide initiative designed to increase access to healthier and more nutritious food for families living in low income and isolated communities who often have health-related problems associated with poor diet and food insecurity (i.e. diabetes, obesity, etc.). In partnership with Feeding America, NLRC and the *lideres comunitarios* created a list of food items that meet nutritional recommendations and are culturally appropriate. Families receive 1-2 loafs of bread, 4 canned items, 1 box of granola or other cereal, and a bag of produce. Each family receives about 20 lbs of food. Although we have created a list of preferred items, what families actually receive may vary at each distribution; sometimes they receive additional products such as water, diapers, and other stuff not commonly given at food banks. Many of the families who receive food from the Mobile Pantry were affected by the wildfires in 2007 and are still recovering from suffering loss of property, employment, etc. Therefore, any product extra items they receive are needed and welcomed. Feeding America covers the cost of food and travel and NLRC provides staffing for coordination of logistics, distributions and community outreach and education.

**Need**

Farmworker families are among the most vulnerable families in North County. The agricultural industry is vital to the economic stability of San Diego County. This integral industry is the fourth largest source of revenue for the county, earning more than 1.5 billion dollars per year and employing approximately 24,570 farmworkers (County of San Diego, 2007; Bade, 2005). Despite such a profitable industry, farmworkers and immigrants bear the cost of low wages—earning a median annual income of $7,500- $9,999— lack of mobility, food insecurity, and limited access to health and social services. Moreover, the deteriorating economy has forced thousands of farmworkers to compete for scarce jobs in the industry (Hirsch, 2009). For those who are dependent on agriculture as a livelihood, season to season income fluctuations cause financial instability, resulting in unmet nutritional needs of farmworker and rural families.

**Research Findings on Food Insecurity**

Results from a study NLRC conducted in North County communities in 2010 suggest that farmworkers, immigrants and non-English speakers living in rural communities of North San Diego County are severely underserved and overwhelmed with social injustices (e.g. substandard housing, unsafe drinking water, health and educational disparities, and poverty). Residents of this area tend to be farmworkers who do not migrate with the seasonal crops. Residents report having lived in the community for an average of 6.72 years (range 8 months to 25 years); and in the United States for an average of 10.72 years (range 8 months to 47 years). Key findings from our study include the following: 1) Approximately 72% of residents live in trailers and 23% live in residential homes; 2) Most residents lack access to meats, vegetables, and fruits; nearly 25% report eating 5 servings of fruits, vegetables, and grains per week; 3) Residents report having up to 7 children in the home (average=2.81) and up to 12 adults in the home (average = 3.21). The average age of the child was 5 years old; and 4) 38% of residents earn less than $1,000 per month. When asked about access to various types of food, rural residents replied as follows: 1) 61% said that they do not have access to chicken; 2) 41% said that they do not have access to beef; 3) 69% said that they do not have access to seafood; 4) 58% said that they do not have access to fruits and vegetables; and 5) 25% said that they do not have access to pork. When asked about their knowledge of food aid, residents reported as follows: 1) 52% of residents did not know of places that offered free food; 2) 33% of residents had received free food; 3) 57% of residents had NOT been to a place that offered free food. Those who reported having received food at a distribution site mentioned receiving it at church (e.g., San Pedro, San Esteban, Pala Mission, San Sebastian, and San Diego), the Pauma Clinic, Native American tribal sources, and other food sources such as Fallbrook Food Bank and Pioneer School.

This case provides a snapshot of critical food needs NLRC has identified in farmworker and rural communities. Families lack access to food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Additionally, families lack information about community distribution places providing food aid.

**Grassroots Leaders Building Healthier Communities**

A unique aspect of this initiative is the leadership of *Poder Popular lideres comunitarios-community leaders* who identified the need for increased access to food and are dedicating countless hours in communities throughout North San Diego County collecting data, organizing relief efforts, meeting with families to assess social conditions, and working with organizations to coordinate delivery of resources to improve the lives of families in the. Through a grassroots community-mobilization approach, they orchestrate an unprecedented coordination of resources and take key leadership in findings solutions to address community challenges.

While the Mobile Pantry is addressing a very immediate need, we are also pursuing community empowerment initiatives to address long-term challenges rural communities encounter accessing food. A parallel process we are undertaking is finding ways to build food system infrastructure in these rural communities by working with local markets and grocery stores and local farmers to increase availability of fresh produce at affordable prices. In conversations with community leaders from the various impacted regions, we are also exploring the possibility of forming a community-operated food cooperative which would be used as a community development initiative to fulfill a great community need. These are more long-term initiatives that are looking at addressing “food deserts” in North County’s rural communities.