

History Behind the
Food Pantry of Jeff Davis County
By Brenda Bell

When I moved to this small Texas town (population 900) in the summer of 1998, I brought with me the recipes for casseroles I had made for a soup kitchen and a women's and children's homeless shelter. The county in which I lived is the third wealthiest in the U.S. and there was great need in our area for feeding programs.

One day, I went to town and asked where and when I should bring my casseroles. The person I asked said "There are no hungry people here." I laughed out loud thinking they were being sarcastic. They were not. No hungry people in a border town, a seasonal tourist destination which provided minimum wage jobs for many of its residents. Surely, there was hunger here.

Immediately, I met with the County Judge, the person in these small far west communities who acts as chairman of the county commissioners, spokesperson for government, etc. She told me that there were thirty three households with applications filled out, ready to be recipients of supplemental food—but there was no agency, no food pantry to help them out here. The nearest pantry was 30 miles away in an adjacent county. "Please help us and get one going here."

Certainly I was willing to make casseroles but start a food pantry?

The judge gave me the name of the Food Bank in another county and the names of people who ran that closer pantry in the next county. A neighbor and I went to watch a distribution and talk with the volunteers of the Lutheran church who ran it.

If we were to do this, we needed money to pay for food, a place to store boxes, a place to make food parcels, a place to distribute from, volunteers to do the work, and an organization to organize it all.

We began by going to the local churches. We asked the four larger ones if they could provide us space for a pantry—to serve ALL residents in need-- and all refused. Lack of space themselves, they said, but they also refused to help out otherwise. I was astonished at the responses.

So we took a different route. We each asked people we knew who we thought would be sympathetic to our idea. And asked them to ask others they knew who might help. It worked and we ended up with nine local citizens including three ranchers, a retired lawyer, a minister's wife, a former newspaper proof reader, an art teacher. A non-profit organization was formed, a charter to define our mission was written and bylaws ensued. We met, as a board, with the director of the Food Bank who would be providing us with food at a nominal cost and learned of the many "needs" people have and how to fulfill them, from listening to stories she shared with us.

Six months later, a local Elderhostel organization became our financial mentor until we received our formal 501(c)(3) designation. And we were on our way. We had a name and a legal organization for providing USDA food to those in need. And we had finally convinced the county to give us, for a short time, a very small building that was in disrepair and not being used.

Fliers were developed in both Spanish and English and distributed with the assistance of the elementary and high school. The local newspaper accepted an article telling all about the pantry, and advising people as to what they needed to bring with them to sign up. We recruited volunteers to sit with prospective clients to help them fill out the federal/state application forms to become eligible for supplemental food. A pick up truck was sitting in front of the tiny building full of balloons and supplemental food! Thirty-nine households responded that day and we felt very successful. Stickers were given to those eligible to show when the next distribution would be and clients were encouraged to find friends who they thought might also be in need.

During the next week, applications were delivered to the only other town in the county, some forty-five miles away, and were given out at the school there. By the end of the week, nearly thirty-five applications had been filled out and turned in to the school secretary.

The second distribution was held two weeks later. The local distribution was now forty-five households and in addition to this, a second pick up truck with two volunteers, went the forty-five miles to the other location in the county and delivered supplemental food to those who had applied.

At the end of the month, we had provided supplemental food for 119 households.

We had solicited funds to purchase the food (at fourteen cents per pound), recruited volunteers to pick it up 30 miles away, unload trucks, make food bags, assist clients applying, drive to another town and do the same. Now what?

One of the board members thought we also ought to open a clothing pantry—all donations welcome, clothing provided free to eligible households. Later, clients felt the need for school lunch makings since our county had no nutrition programs. What about teaching people to cook with the foods they received in their bags? Could we be a conduit for other social services? Provide a space for well-baby care? An inoculation site for traveling nurses?

Occupancy in the tiny building lasted a year and a half. We could only find a building large enough which cost \$500 a month plus heat, water and light. The decision was made to build a building. In December of 2003, the Food Pantry moved into a brand new metal building, 40' x 90', housing a Food Pantry, a clothing pantry, a kitchen, a classroom and a small office. The building was completely paid for by local donations and grants—not a single penny from county, state or federal coffers. The Food Pantry had come of age.

As of this time, the Food Pantry serves 208 households, 506 individuals in those households, about one quarter of the county's total population.