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Aim for hunger, hit poverty

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Hamilton food program helps seniors across town

By Rob Mitchell Executive Editor

As he backs his Frankenstein of a pickup truck to the curb, Curt Kinkead knows at least one person will be there to help him unload.

Sally Howard, a retired beautician with a French manicure, strides up and tells him to load up a box of food into her walker's basket.

"Another?" Kinkead asks.

"No, I don't want it to fall over," she tells him, and heads down the walkway to the basement of the Villas at Hamilton.

The food gets sorted into shopping bags - 65 of them last Friday - and distributed to seniors in the Villas and other places around town.

He'd just come from Trader Joe's, where three times a week he picks up a load of food and flowers.

She's always on hand with her dog, Jake, to help him unload. She used to walk marathons before her knees went; now she won't let her walker keep her from helping.

Earlier that morning, Kinkead had made a run down to a wholesale produce market in South San Francisco to pick up more produce. That day it was green onions, lettuce, yellow squash and a few other items. He's never sure what he'll get.

He is sure about his mission.

"We want to end poverty in subsidized senior housing in Marin," Kinkead said. Food is the key, but there's more.

"It's about community," Kinkead's partner Ruth Schwartz said. "People really start to connect. It's different from wealthy people giving money."

When they moved into the Villas about three and a half years ago, they discovered that some of

their neighbors weren't getting enough to eat. Most of the residents live on fixed incomes with subsidized rent.

To help, originally they aimed to keep grocery costs below \$100 a month for each resident. Trader Joe's, Safeway, Peet's Coffee, Starbucks, the produce market have all pitched in since then. Kinkead and Schwartz accomplished their and their work has grown from there.

They have started a non-profit, Respecting Our Elders, to further their goal. They plan on keeping the operation local, informal and volunteer-based.

Anyone can come and help; all volunteers get free food, too. They don't ask where the food is going, they just help where it's needed.

One man started taking more food than usual.

"It's the only thing he had to give to the people who were taking care of his mother," Kinkead said. "She was dying."

The food became a kind of currency, and that's one reason Schwartz and Kinkead want to keep the arrangement informal.

"If they don't take the things they need, well, it's meaningless," he said. "So we don't even ask."

And by keeping it informal, they avoid the extensive paperwork and requirements of grant applications. If the pickup truck is any indication, they will make do with anything. It's pieced together for free by Arnold's Automotive from a donated pickup and Curt's old Nissan, both totalled. It a key component of the program, but Kinkead would like another one. He's trying to get the San Rafael Trader Joe's to donate food, which would allow them to help █-6 times the people."

Last Friday, about 15 people showed up to help sort, to shop, and to share some time together.

Wafi Ziani's grandson Justin, 3, oversaw the activity with a stuffed dog under his arm.

"Let's go delivery," he said.

"He likes to help out," explained his grandfather.

They all do.

"You can be poverty-stricken at any level of income," Kinkead said. "It's amazing."

