

Food in the bank

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For Phyllis Cantor the victory came out of nowhere.

On Wednesday, officials from Wal-Mart Stores Inc. came to St. Louis to announce that the company's Sam's Club warehouse stores would donate millions of pounds of food to the nation's largest food bank network — food that Cantor had tried unsuccessfully to get into the hands of the hungry two years ago.

In 2006, the company announced that Sam's Clubs would stop donating perishable foods, citing safety concerns. Since then it has thrown away food approaching or at its expiration date.

Not long after the stores began that practice, Cantor, of Chesterfield, saw a Sam's Club employee throwing out boxes of salad greens. "I said to the guy 'What are you doing with all that?' and he said, 'I'm throwing it away,'" she recalled Wednesday. "I said, 'Please don't do that, I'll take it to my food bank.'"

But, Cantor said, the employee wouldn't let her take the food, saying he'd been directed to throw it away.

Over the next few months Cantor said she saw employees at Sam's Clubs throughout the region throwing away food — 37 rotisserie chickens one day, seven slabs of ribs another, 30 pies after Thanksgiving.

"It was appalling," she said.

So Cantor embarked on a crusade of sorts and brought the issue to state Rep. Jane Cunningham, R-Chesterfield. Cunningham eventually succeeded in getting legislation passed that would protect stores from liability if they donated food. (Similar legislation existed at the federal level.)

Still, Wal-Mart said it would not donate perishable food and would continue throwing it away, saying it was not a legal matter but a food safety issue.

"It was never a question of liability," said Bill Wertz, a Wal-Mart spokesman. "It was a question of quality."

Wertz added, "We basically instructed stores not to contribute food while we got this program in place. We wanted to do it, but we wanted it to be (a program) we had confidence in."

Two months ago, the company launched a pilot program at St. Louis area Sam's Clubs to give perishable goods to the St. Louis Area Foodbank. Since then the stores have given weekly infusions of bread and meat to the Foodbank, which distributes food to 500 area pantries and shelters. The bread and meat is frozen as it approaches its expiration date, so it can be trucked to the Foodbank and stored. Wertz said there were no plans to donate expiring produce or seafood because they are too difficult to handle safely.

For the Foodbank, the meat has been a welcome donation. The Sam's Club meat has meant the facility has

reduced its spending on protein by 20 percent.

"So far we've received a little bit over 94,000 pounds of meat," said Lenora Young, a director with the Foodbank. "We bring in over 9,500 pounds a week. That will feed 8,000 people."

With a shaky economy and high fuel and food prices, demand for food has doubled at many area pantries, Young said.

"This Sam's program has really helped us meet that demand," she said.

Last year Wal-Mart stores donated 1.7 million pounds of shelf-stable food to the Foodbank. This year, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores will donate an estimated 70 million pounds nationwide.

On Wednesday, Wal-Mart officials also announced a \$1.5 million donation to America's Second Harvest, the country's largest food bank network. The company gave the network \$5 million last year.

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