

Big changes coming to Community Chest

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 12 July 2014 12:36



By JON LANCE News-Telegram Staff Photographer photographer@ssecho.com Hopkins County Community Chest is in for some big changes this year thanks to Lowe's Home Improvement Store and Hopkins County Emergency Medical Services.

First, on June 25, Lowe's Distribution Center in Mount Vernon collected approximately 2,000 pounds of food donated for the community chest during a drive at the warehouse

"The food donations from that facility are huge for us," said Judy Ann Moore, executive director for the Hopkins County Community Chest. "But, that donation was just the first in a saga of wonderful things that has happened here recently at the food bank."

Second, Hopkins County EMS is hosting a "Strike-Out Hunger" Softball Tournament at Coleman Park Saturday, July 26. A team entry fee is \$200 or the equivalent in canned food. The deadline to sign up for the softball event is July 23. Lowe's will be donating a hot dog stand, tent and food for the event. All proceeds from the food sales and game will go directly to Hopkins County food banks.

"We are so thrilled for the upcoming softball event," said Moore. "We really need the resources to help feed our community."

Third, Lowe's is also sponsoring a free dinner for food bank clients on Aug. 7. The meal will be at First United Methodist Church; the time will be announced closer to the date. Moore invites anyone in the community who is in need to dinner that evening.

"Lowe's is going to cook the meal, serve it and everything else that evening," stated Moore. "Lowe's wants to help the community and enlighten their staff that there are real hunger issues in East Texas."

"The people who are struggling with hunger in our community are individuals most people would be shocked to learn need food assistance; 18 percent of our clients are grandparents who are guardians of their grandchildren."

Fourth, and perhaps the biggest change for the community chest, will be a completely redecorated warehouse with new storage units, lockers and a "county store" — all made possible by Lowe's.

Since Moore took over the community chest last year, she has wanted her clients to choose their own food instead of distributing pre-made bags that may not coincide with recipients' dietary restrictions. That's where the idea of the "country grocery store" started to take shape.

"Right now, if one of our clients has diabetes or food allergies, they have no control over what they are given at the pantry," Moore said.

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Lowe's will be redesigning the community chest distribution center to resemble a traditional "grocery store" with aisles and grocery carts. Individuals who are on the food pantry member registry will receive a list at the front of the store with a specific number of fruits, vegetables and meats they can select based on their family's size. They then walk the aisles of the community chest and select anything they want in each category on their list.

At the end of the checkout process, someone from community chest compares the number of items the recipient has with the list to make sure they match; when they do, the items are packaged for the recipient to take home for their family. A volunteer from the community chest will even help them load the food into their vehicles, if needed.

"We wanted not only the freedom of choice to be apart of the community chest but personal dignity," said Moore.

Construction on the "country store" is expected to be completed in August.