

By Karen Ellis



Cleveland County Department of Social Services Saves \$10,000 in County Dollars while Helping County Citizens in Need of Food

According to a report from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, one in six neighbors in North Carolina struggle with having “food insecurities.” This term refers to a lack of access to enough food for all household members to eat each month.

The Cleveland County Department of Social Services (DSS) has effectively serviced clients to determine eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) through the federal Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), previously known as Food Stamps. Unfortunately, sometimes receiving FNS benefits are not enough. Eighty-one percent of the N.C. households that receive FNS benefits still don't know where their next meal is coming from.

Every day, workers throughout our department encounter adults, children, and elderly that have an immediate need for food. Whenever we receive Adult Protective Services and Child Protective Services reports, we frequently encounter elderly/disabled adults and children who are hungry and struggling to meet their basic needs. In addition to client circumstances, there have been major state functionality computer issues with the benefit eligibility system, North Carolina Families Accessing Services through Technology (NC FAST). The system has caused delays for clients receiving their FNS benefits.

In keeping with our mission statement, “to promote citizen advocacy,” we were compelled to use agency funds to provide

All food items collected during the Health and Benefits Fair have been placed in several food closets located throughout Cleveland County DSS. The 2014 Health and Benefits Fair Food Drive totals were as follows:

- 579** Cleveland County Department of Social Services
- 354** Cleveland County Administration, EMS & the Library
- 132** Cleveland County Health Department, Landfill/Manned sites and Animal Control 132
- 43** Cleveland County Sheriff's Department, Detention Center and Communications

1,108 Total Food Items Collected



food for individuals and families in need. There were also many occasions when Economic Service workers went office to office to collect food items from others in the department to give to a client in need. This increasing practice prompted an idea for employees to start an agency-wide food pantry. As a result of the continuous food need, there are employee-sponsored food pantries throughout our agency. Over the past year, we have had several food drives to stock these pantries. We have dedicated certain days with different themes. For example, “Meat Day” prompted workers to provide their choice of meat to add to the pantry. Our most successful food drive occurred during the 2014 Cleveland County Health and Benefits Fair due to the Chuck Wilson, a child welfare attorney for the county, who came up with the idea. During this time, there was a competition with all departments within Cleveland County to donate the most food. At the end of the three-day period, we collected well over 1,100 items (see attached picture) to share with Cleveland County residents in need. The DSS Food Pantry has proven to be a success for our clients and for our agency's budget. 📷

Karen Ellis is the director of the Cleveland County Department of Social Services.