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Volunteers unload bags of nonperishable food donated during the 2016 Letter Carriers Food Drive. Scheduled for May 13, the effort to help local food banks feed hungry people in Snohomish County will mark its 25th anniversary this year. (Volunteers of America Western Washington photo)

JULIE MUHLSTEIN

When it comes to food banks, Postal Service delivers

By **Julie Muhlstein**

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LOCAL NEWS JULIE MUHLSTEIN



Circle May 13 on your calendar. Put a bag of food out that morning for pickup by your mail carrier. In helping your neighbors, you'll be part of a 25-year tradition.

Twenty-five years ago, the National Association of Letter Carriers launched a charity effort that spread across the country. Since its start in 1993, the [Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive](#) has become the largest food-gathering event here and across the country.

“I’ve been involved all 25 years,” said Bob James, a letter carrier whose route is in Mountlake Terrace. He delivers to upscale homes along Lake Ballinger, but also to less affluent people living in [post-World War II era houses near I-5](#).

“The income-level differences between the two are really drastic. Some of my patrons use food banks,” said James, 64, who belongs to National Association of Letter Carriers 791, the union’s Snohomish County branch. “They’re not working, or they’re the working poor only making \$10 or \$11 an hour.”

In Snohomish County, where 236,153 pounds of food were collected in 2016, mail carriers will deliver reminder postcards followed by white donation bags next week, in advance of the May 13 drive. Nationwide, an estimated 80 million pounds of nonperishable food were collected in 2016, which helped more than 10,000 food agencies.

Here, the food drive is coordinated by [Volunteers of America](#) Western Washington, [United Way](#) of Snohomish County, National Association of Letter Carriers 791 Snohomish County branch and the Snohomish County Labor Council, in partnership with the national union.

Last year, nonperishable goods collected during the drive provided 196,794 meals to local food banks’ visitors, according to Volunteers of America.

Mail carriers are the most visible faces of the food drive, but dozens of volunteers join in. One local business does some really heavy lifting.

With its semi-trucks, Everett-based [Hogland Transfer Company](#) has been involved in the Letter Carrier Food Drive for about 20 years. Company President Steve Holtgeerts said Hogland sends trucks to area post offices as letter carriers bring in donations.

“Goods are put in large totes on pallet boards and loaded into our trailers. We haul them from the post offices to the Volunteers of America food bank,” Holtgeerts said. The [VOA oversees food banks](#) and food pantries around the region. Hogland Transfer stores some of the collected food, distributing it later as needed.

“It’s just something that benefits the community. Obviously there’s a huge need,” said Holtgeerts. “We’ve been in this community 84 years. We try to do our part to assist with the needs.”

Those needs are overwhelming.

United Way of Snohomish County produced a [2016 report](#) titled “[Making Ends Meet.](#)” It found that although the overall rate of people living at or below the federal poverty line in the county is 10.3 percent, “one-third of households in Snohomish County are struggling to make ends meet.”

The report focused on poverty by geographical area, and cited five population groups likely to struggle with self-sufficiency: children, female-headed households with children younger than 5, those of Hispanic or Latino origin, people of color and people with disabilities.

Countywide, according to the report, 36 percent of female-headed households with children younger than 5 live in poverty. And 14 percent of all children in Snohomish County live at or below the poverty line.

For 2017, the Department of Health and Human Services lists the [federal poverty level](#) as \$12,060 in annual income for individuals, \$16,240 for a family of two, and \$24,600 for a family of four.

James, who has worked for the U.S. Postal Service since 1979, sees beyond statistics. On his route, he sees struggling families, the faces of poverty.

“We’re hoping for 340,000 pounds of good quality food,” he said. “With the great things we have in our country, it doesn’t quite make sense that some children don’t have enough to eat.”

Julie Muhlstein: 425-339-3460; jmuhlstein@heraldnet.com.

Food drive

The Letter Carriers Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive is scheduled for May 13. Mail carriers in Snohomish County will deliver donation bags next week. Donors are asked to leave bags filled with nonperishable food items out for mail carriers that morning. Among items especially needed:

Canned meats

Peanut butter

Canned soup, chili, stew

Boxed macaroni and cheese

Canned fruits and fruit juices

Cooking oils, flour, other baking products



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The advertisement features a vertical layout with a color gradient from orange at the top to dark blue at the bottom. The top section has a stylized, bubbly font for "\$17,000 Summer DAYS". The middle section has bold, white text on a teal background for "WEDNESDAY HOT SEAT DRAWINGS 6PM - 9PM IN JUNE". The bottom section has white text on a dark blue background for "FIVE WINNERS EVERY HALF HOUR!". At the very bottom is the Tulamp Resort Casino logo, which includes a small illustration of a resort building.

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