

Giving Upper County a hand



Zach Smith

HopeSource

JoAnn Rushton walks through the HopeSource food bank in Cle Elum. The nonprofit organization hopes to soon have its mobile food bank up and running. A fundraiser last month brought in about \$7,000 to support the new service. (Zach Smith / Daily Record)



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By ZACH SMITH staff writer |

For some people, helping others is simply second nature. Whether it's something substantial like organizing a fundraiser, or something as simple as propping a door open so a crowd can pass through — these people are constantly putting the needs of others before their own.

In Kittitas County, Good Samaritans can be found at HopeSource — a nonprofit organization that's always there to lend a helping hand. And while HopeSource is based in Ellensburg, its services are available county-wide.

JoAnn Rushton, office manager at HopeSource Cle Elum, said Upper Kittitas County residents can take advantage of services ranging from transportation and housing assistance to the only operational food bank in the Cle Elum-Roslyn area. “We offer all of the same services we have in the Lower County,” Rushton said. “(The services) are utilized quite well.”

HopeSource's Cle Elum food bank serves approximately 325 people each month, Rushton said. Keeping up with the demand in a small community like Upper Kittitas County is a difficult task, Rushton said, which is why HopeSource puts such a strong emphasis on maintaining a connection with the community, as well as facilitating a connection between the various groups looking to help people who are less fortunate.

“(Connecting with the community is) especially important because even though you think everybody knows everybody, sometimes they don't,” Rushton said.

Rushton said during this time of year, with the holidays right around the corner, it is especially important for HopeSource to have strong relationships with organizations throughout the community.

She said Shoemaker Manufacturing, Suncadia and Walter Strom Middle School are all in the middle of food drives that will benefit HopeSource's Upper County food bank.

"Quite a few businesses are having food drives for us," she said. "We like to work with everyone we can."

Transportation service

Perhaps the most visible service HopeSource offers throughout Kittitas County is its transportation service. HopeSource offers door-to-door transportation service, where its bus picks people up and takes them wherever they need to go. People just need to call for a ride, whether it's to the grocery store or the doctor's office.

Rushton said HopeSource's transportation service is especially important in Upper County considering how spread out the homes are and that many people have no way of getting into town.

"There's still many rural areas around here," she said. "There's quite a few people that don't have adequate transportation."

The transportation service is especially helpful for the elderly and disabled community, Rushton said.

"We do have a lot of seniors and disabled people in this neck of the woods," Rushton said. "That can make even coming from Roslyn difficult at times."

Mobile food bank

HopeSource is preparing to unveil a new service that also will help the same people. Its mobile food van will essentially be a

food bank on wheels — delivering food directly to people who aren't able to drive to the food bank in Cle Elum.

Last month HopeSource hosted a fundraiser in Roslyn to help raise the approximately \$20,000 needed to purchase a new van — with maintenance and gas expenses being funded by ongoing donations to HopeSource.

HopeSource CEO Susan Grindle said the event raised around \$7,000 for the van, which is one reason she is confident HopeSource will have the van on the road shortly after the new year.

"(The fundraiser) was exceptional," Grindle said. "We still think we're on track for the first quarter of 2014 to be on the road."

The mobile food van is a priority for HopeSource because, according to Grindle, too many people who qualify for food benefits are unable to take advantage of them. Grindle said there are 3,956 people in Kittitas County eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Of those people, she said 1,025 actually use the benefits, leaving nearly 3,000 SNAP qualifiers living without food benefits.

Grindle said many are seniors, people with disabilities and families living in remote areas of the county — groups the mobile van could serve.

"What we do know is a lot of people in the Upper County live in remote areas," she said. "It's harder for them to come in (to the food bank), so we want to bring the food to them."