

COMMUNITIES > West Side



By **MARWA ELTAGOURI**
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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Carlos Hernandez leaned over a shopping cart so stacked with food items - from crates of SoBe fruit juice to bags of corn chips - that the pile towered over him. He began to push it slowly, almost delicately, so that none of his prized boxes fell off.

Hernandez doesn't speak much English. He didn't have to on Wednesday. His smile did all the talking for him.

Hernandez was one of about 1,200 people lined up outside of West Side's Belle Center where four large tractor trailers were quickly emptied of food and supplies for impoverished families. The supplies were donated by Feed the Children as part of the national organization's "Americans Feeding Americans Caravan."

This year's heavy turnout brought in 400 more people than the last distribution in November, an indication that poverty continues to grow at a significant rate in the Western New York region. A third of Buffalo residents live below the federal poverty line, according to recent census data. Of them, about 40 percent are unemployed.

"Especially in this neighborhood," Hernandez said. "It's the best thing to happen in a long time."

Nearly one in two children living in Buffalo is at risk of going hungry. The child poverty rate for Buffalo is more than twice the national average.

Recipients who took advantage of Wednesday's event were screened based on income guidelines and then given vouchers to exchange for free food, which included rice, beans, pasta, cereal, juice and soda. Families also received a box of hygiene supplies with items such as toothpaste.

Each 50- to 60-pound bundle of food and supplies should take care of a four-person family for a week, said Eric Johns, pastor of the Buffalo Dream Center and founder of the WNY project.

"This area is the poorest in Buffalo," Johns said of the lower West Side. "So this is just such a privilege for them."

Feed the Children teamed up with PepsiCo, Tops Markets, the Belle Center, Buffalo AmeriCorps and the Buffalo Dream Center to coordinate the massive food distribution. The caravan visited for the fourth time since 2009.

About 100 volunteers helped distributed the stacked crates of beverages and heavy boxes of food. Those in line included everyone from Somali and Rwandan refugees to single mothers with young children in strollers.

"We don't have enough, we never have enough," said Veronica Pinto, a West Side resident who recently moved from El Salvador. Though she receives Social Security benefits, she said it doesn't quite suffice for her family of four.

For Tracy Santana, the distribution means everything. She works at a school and receives no income during the summer besides that of her husband's federal funding, totaling \$700 for their family. And after their rent payment, they aren't left with much.

"We never have enough for food. The food stamps don't give us as much as they used to," she said.

The West Side is a poor neighborhood, she said, describing how the children she works with during the school year often receive their only meal of the day through the school's lunch program.

"And for us," she said, beckoning to her husband, "we'll stretch out this food for as long as it can possibly last."

meltagouri@buffnews.com

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.....a West Side resident who recently moved from El Salvador. Though she receives Social Security benefits, she said it doesn't quite suffice for her family of four.

How is it that the family receives social security benefits after recently arriving here from another country?

PAULA FERRARO, BATAVIA, NY on Thu Jul 26, 2012 at 11:32 AM

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