Despite chill, thousands wait hours for free food

Minneapolis mission provides Easter bounty

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Vera Boston, a 78-year-old widow who subsists solely on Social Security, was shivering by 5:30 a.m. Wednesday, even though she was wearing "two of everything." For 5½ hours, Boston had waited outside a former synagogue at 1006 Oliver Ave. N. in Minneapolis to ensure that she would receive in Easter bounty of two free bags of food from the Disciples Ministry Church Mission.

"I think it's real nice. People sure appreciate it; there are a lot of people who need it," she said. Boston will use the food she received for her Easter dinner.

By 4 p.m. Wednesday, 50 to 60 volunteers had distributed about 6,000 bags of groceries from the mission's pantry, and another 6,000 from the parking lot.

The food given to more than 5,000 people included fruits, vegetables, pasta, baked goods, soup, juice and bakery products.

Mission officials estimated that each person received an average of about 25 pounds of food and that the total giveaway was about $175,000. Because much of the food is donated, they projected the giveaway actually cost the mission about $8,716.

Those numbers are impressive, but a better measure is the visual impression left by the needy — from both Minneapolis and St. Paul who waited for food. Confining to the sidewalk by snow fencing, they stood five or six deep in a line that stretched north on Oliver Avenue to the corner of 21st Avenue North, then extended a block east to Newton Avenue, where the crowd continued.

Led by Pastor Paul Arnopoulous, the church mission also distributes groceries on Christmas, a total of about 18 million pounds of food annually. With its Monday through Friday distribution, and daily breakfasts and lunches, the mission serves about 41,000 people a month, Arnopoulous said.

Twenty companies contributed food for the Easter giveaway, he said. About 90 percent of the food distributed by the mission annually is donated by various organizations. The rest is purchased through contributions.

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