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Food bank director has passion for helping others

By Sara Israelsen-Hartley

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PROVO — When Myla Dutton started working for Community Action Services and Food Bank in 1979, the "bank" was a 5-by-7 foot pantry that served five families a week.

Now, with Dutton as the executive director, the second largest food bank in the state helps nearly 150 families a day.

"We do have daily miracles," Dutton said. "But getting a family out of poverty takes a long time. There are no really easy answers for the long-term, serious problems."

Those problems, beyond empty cupboards, include a lack of affordable housing, a shortage of jobs, inability to read, no transportation and too little education.

The lack of easy answers doesn't stop Dutton from trying.

For the past 30 years, Dutton has quietly dedicated her life to serving the impoverished through more than just a handout.

"We feel passionate about the food bank," Dutton said. "It's an opportunity to work with a family about their situation. Feeding children and adults is important, but getting them more information helps almost as much."

Each time a family comes to the food bank, they meet with a Community Action employee to review their financial situation and employment prospects.

The worker can then match the family with programs or training that will hopefully lead to the goal of self-reliance.

Dutton's eyes fill with tears as she talks about the success stories — families who, after three or four visits for food, didn't need to come back. Adults who learned to read. Families who got help with utility payments and are now back on their feet. Homeowners who avoided predatory lending thanks to a Community Action mortgage counselor.

Dutton often has a hand in the creation or growth of those programs, though she's quick

to deflect praise.

"It's not me doing it," she stresses. "It's the conversation."

But those conversations among nonprofit groups and community organizers wouldn't really happen without Dutton, others say.

"There are many organizations that provide services," said Doug Carlson, director of Provo City Housing Authority. "But really, (Myla) is the cog in the center of the wheel in Provo, relative to caring for the homeless."

Dutton is deeply involved with the continuum of care — a group of non-profit, community and government agencies focused on ending homelessness in Utah County.

When she isn't writing grants, attending meetings or serving on committees, Dutton said, she enjoys Facebook Scrabble tournaments with her sister or a good mystery novel. She also shyly admits to being a Star Trek fan.

Not one to talk about herself, Dutton deftly directs the focus back to community action - her passion, her family.

"I love my work," she says. "It's so great."

Despite the long hours and tragic situations she sees every day, she still loves her job.

"Myla cares about the entire human services world," said Bill Hulterstrom, president and CEO of United Way of Utah County. "She's always had a passion for helping those in need, but more importantly, for doing it the right way. Just handing out the food is one thing. Getting families the counseling they need to get them on their feet — that's a whole new level."

► How to help

Community Action Services and Food Bank in Provo receives about 3.5 million pounds of food a year and donates nearly 200,000 pounds of food each month.

However, the need is ongoing and donations of food and money are always appreciated. To donate or volunteer, visit www.communityactionprovo.org/, drop off donations to 815 S. Freedom Blvd. in Provo or participate in local food drives.

e-mail: sisraelsen@desnews.com

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