The National Association of Letter Carriers' annual food drive is Saturday. Residents can leave canned goods at their mailbox and a postal worker will pick them up. STAFF

# Mail carriers to collect donated canned goods

## Food drive Saturday helps stock Butler County food pantry.

**By Mike Rutledge**
Staff Writer

BUTLER COUNTY – Letter carriers' trucks will return to their post offices heavier than when they started out Saturday morning, because postal workers will be collecting nonperishable canned food while making their deliveries.

"People can leave their canned goods at the mailbox," said Donald Hershner, an executive board member for the Dayton Miami Valley AFL-CIO, who brought the program to Butler County. One key to the nationwide program's success, he said, "is how simple it is – it's just take your canned goods, leave them at the mailbox on Saturday morning, and they will pick it up."

"If, by chance, they aren't picked up, you can call your local post office and they will send somebody out to pick it up," said Hershner, a Hamilton native now living in Oxford, who gave presentations about the program to the city councils of Hamilton and Middletown.

"It's the largest one-day food drive in the world," Hershner

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# Food drive

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said. Postal workers in Butler County started participating in 1995, the second year of the program, which started on a trial basis in 11 cities, he said.

Last year the National Association of Letter Carriers' drive collected a record 71 million pounds of food nationally, including 33,784 pounds in Butler County. Carriers in the county have gathered more than 1.2 million pounds since 1995.

Tina Osso, executive director and founder of Shared Harvest Foodbank, calls the food drive, which happens each May, a blessing at a time of need.

"This food drive is the one that helps us get through the long, dry months of summer, when children are home from school and many of these kids – nearly half the students in the state of Ohio are on free and reduced lunch, and so they're at home during the summer without access to the food, at a time when their parents' budgets don't increase to serve them those extra meals," Osso said.

Also during the summer, "traditional sources of donations from the food industry tend to dry up a bit, so the letter carriers' food drive is perfect timing for us," she said. "It's a way for us to collect tons and tons of food to help stock the shelves of our member food pantries during these months when families are faced with serving their children extra meals."

Hamilton, Fairfield, Middletown, Oxford and Trenton all participate. Some carriers in rural areas may not, he said. It's best to put the cans in plastic bags. Some people even donate entire cases of food, he said.

"We've got to coordinate with the post office, because you're not allowed overtime," Hershner said. "They've got to get their route done in an appropriate time. So if their truck fills up, sometimes they'll call retired postal workers and other volunteers with a pickup truck. They will go out to the route, where they are, unload the truck into the pickup truck, and take it back to the post office, so they can continue their route."

"It's interesting. Some of the collection comes from the poorer areas," Hershner said. "The people realize how tough it is out there. The heart of the community really shows up at the end of the day."

Because food collected in each county remain in that county, "you truly are fighting hunger right here at home," Osso said.

Hershner has seen who visits the food pantries: "It's not the deadbeat, it's the working family that needs assistance to get through the month – the single moms. It's a difficult economy out there."

It will take volunteers 2-4 weeks to sort the cans and make sure the items aren't expired, Osso said.

She offers this message: "Be as generous as you can. Although we hear stories that the economy is improving, the people who are still standing in our food-pantry lines don't feel like their economic situations have improved since they lost their jobs during the great Recession."

"When 70 percent of the people standing in food-pantry lines are working, but they're not earning enough money to make ends meet, that tells me that there are plenty of jobs, but those jobs are not paying a living wage," she said.

Volunteers wishing to help sort cans can call Crystal Corbin at the foodbank, 513-874-0114.

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