



Norm Tumlinson enjoys his work as a volunteer at the food pantry.

Story and photos by Toni Garrard Clay

## Meeting Our Neighbors' Most Basic Need

Josiah Smith walked through the door of the Henderson County Food Pantry quietly, his eyes searching for someone who could provide access to the goods stacked on shelves throughout the building. Whip-thin with a weathered, open face, he made his way to the desk where volunteer Margaret Austin sat, waiting to greet him with kindness.

Austin asked the older gentleman a few standard questions and checked the food pantry's database. Smith (not his real name) had been there once before, four years ago — much longer than the required three-month-minimum waiting period between donations to the same individual or family.

"I'm glad there's a place like this that can help people when they need it," said Smith as volunteers filled a sack with canned goods, meat and bread. "They're good to everybody that comes in here."

Smith, who appears to be well past traditional retirement age, has a regular job on a cleaning crew. But, he explained, spreading his empty hands out before him, his hours have been reduced, and he isn't able to make ends meet anymore. As a result he turned to the food pantry to meet his immediate need for food. The hope is that his hours will soon take an upswing. His situation is similar to that of thousands of other area residents.

"We don't have enough funds to function as a grocery store," said longtime volunteer Karen Whitten, "but we can help get people over the hump. [Things like] sickness and seasonal work downturns can hit people hard.

"We see people living on Social Security who suddenly have their children and grandchildren move in, and they just don't have enough."

This past September, 506 families received goods from the food pantry, which accounted for 1,624 individuals. As the holidays approach, those numbers will almost certainly increase.

The Henderson County Food Pantry is a nonprofit organization in Athens serving all of Henderson County and staffed entirely by volunteers. There are currently 42 regular volunteers, scheduled to work a half day, every other week. In addition, 40 substitutes serve on an as-needed basis.

"We can always use more volunteers," said Betty Mackie, who has volunteered for the past 14 years. "You should volunteer if you really like to help people who need help."

Pantry workers stock and distribute both food and essentials, such as soap, detergent and toiletries. The goods are purchased with donated funds. In addition,



*Terri Cole, Donnie Gwaltney, Beverly Moore, Margaret Austin and Norm Tumlinson are among the volunteers who serve a half day every other week at the Henderson County Food Pantry. The pantry serves over 1,000 county residents of all ages every month.*

Brookshire's and Pepperidge Farm faithfully donate baked goods that have expired but are still good. In the summer, people also share from their gardens, and during the holidays, seasonal food drives by schools, churches and other organizations typically stock the shelves to overflowing.

"Christmas is real exciting," said Whitten. "We get so much food we can't move around, and yet it all goes in a hurry."

Volunteers sack food, restock shelves, interview recipients, drive to pick up groceries and unload delivery trucks. Board members, who are also regular volunteers, are responsible for ordering goods, scheduling volunteers and keeping the financial records.

"We see seniors come in here who say, 'I never thought I'd have to be here,'" related Whitten. "So many people are struggling. We serve a huge number of people."

Most everyone who receives help from the pantry appears to be grateful, she said. A few, in fact, give back as soon as they are able.

"We had a man who received help from the pantry and came back and brought me four cans of green beans as soon as he was able to spare them," recalled Whitten. "They looked like T-bone steaks to me."

Volunteer Austin asked that people throughout Henderson County give to the pantry during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season.

"Remember the families that may not have enough food on their holiday tables," she said. "At Christmas, please add a gift to the food pantry to your Christmas list. ... During the holiday season we receive such a blessing from being able to put a little something extra or something special into their grocery sacks." 🇺🇸



*The Henderson County Food Pantry, located at 715 E. Corsicana Street in Athens, is open Monday-Friday, 8:30am-noon. Four to six volunteers are needed each day; more for deliveries and during the holidays. For more information, call the pantry at 903-677-1600. Donations may be mailed to PO Box 2062, Athens, TX 75751.*