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Denver, CO
Circ. 512879
From Page:
4b
1/1/2009
148298

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Small hands reach out to have-nots

This year, Denver's annual sack-lunch giveaway had to downgrade its offerings.

By Sally S. Ho *The Denver Post*

Sitting next to big boxes of bananas on the floor, Ryan Berg quickly and robotically tears apart the bunches.

"Last year, I passed out bottles of water," Ryan said.

The 12-year-old boy from Elizabeth is a three-year veteran volunteer for Denver's annual "Feed the Homeless" project.

On New Year's Eve, Ryan, his dad and two sisters, along with dozens of others, gave out 450 bagged lunches at the St. Francis Center in Denver.

Inside each bagged lunch was two peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, cheese crackers, chips, candy, dessert, snacks and some fruit. Bottled water and bananas also were offered.

Sixty volunteers had gathered Saturday to make the 900 sandwiches and do other prep work.

"This year has been huge for us," said Susette Frausto, who founded the project in 2004 with her husband in memory of a homeless man who froze to death in Civic Center park. "We started with just 50 lunches in 2004 and grew to 125 in 2005, 225 in 2006, 300 in 2007."

In past years, Feed the Homeless has given out coffee, hot soup and ham and cheese sandwiches. This year, it was only able to provide peanut butter and jelly because of funding.

"It's a sign of the times," said Tom Luehrs, director at St. Francis, the host site for the giveaway. "But this goes to show that people are still generous. They still step back and think, 'Yeah, it's no good for me, but it's even harder for some people.'"

Teddy Vigil, 64, has been homeless for 23 years and a regular at the St.

Francis Center. He said all the items in the lunch bag were his favorites.

"I like them all. I can't be choosy; I just take anything the Lord provides," Vigil said.

The giveaway started at 11 a.m. and served 375 people within half an hour.

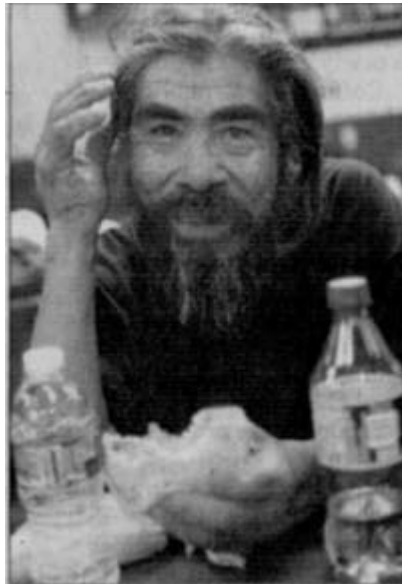
"They used to do it at Civic Center park, but this is much better," Luehrs said. "It's a warm building, and they can sit in here and eat in a much more humane way than just eating on the streets."

St. Francis also provided warm clothes and other winter gear for those in need.

Ryan and his family have turned Feed the Homeless into an annual tradition that he calls "a cool thing."

"When you see how happy they are, it just makes you want to do it again," he said.

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Teddy Vigil, 64, enjoys his lunch of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, fruit, dessert and snacks. "I like them all," he said.





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From left, Luke Wamboldt, 11, Colin Bauerle, 10, and Jordan Monk, 8, of Elizabeth hand out water bottles to a crowd including Pedro Rebera at the St. Francis Center in Denver on Wednesday as part of the Feed the Homeless project. Photos by Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post