

Food Share, Employment Link join to fill bags with meals for students

By Magdalena Wegrzyn

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LONGMONT — Once a week, Trent Proctor joins a handful of Employment Link volunteers at the Community Food Share warehouse to fill grocery bags with food.

And every Friday, those meals are distributed at Columbine Elementary, a Title I school where nearly 90 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, according to the St. Vrain Valley School District.

“I’m a nice person, and I like to be nice to people and help out people who have no way to get food,” said Proctor, 23, a client of Employment Link, a Boulder-based nonprofit that places individuals with disabilities in paid and volunteer positions.

Many of the organization’s clients have been cared for by other people for most of their lives, so this is a welcome opportunity to be on the giving end, said Robert Lawhead, Employment Link’s executive director.

“When they can give to someone else, that really brightens their day and makes them feel good,” Lawhead said. “It’s a really nice switch to be able to give back to the community.”

Employment Link volunteers work each Monday through Wednesday to assemble about 360 bags with a nutritional mix of food through the Feed the Families program, said Michael StaffordCrane, director of operations for Community Food Share.

The packages provide two to three supplemental meals to get students through the weekend, StaffordCrane said.

The partnership between the nonprofits started in 2002, when Community Food Share needed a consistent group of volunteers to assemble the bags and Employment Link needed a community activity for its clients.

Seven years later, the partnership is thriving, and despite some volunteers’ severe developmental limitations, there’s a place for everyone.

Bill Dameron cannot hear or speak, so he carefully arranges filled bags in multi-colored, plastic wheelbarrows.

Dameron, 66, works part-time but also has been a volunteer for years, Lawhead said.

At the start of the program, Columbine students would receive the bagged meals only if they regularly attended classes, but that requirement has fallen by the wayside in recent years, Columbine principal Eddie Cloke said.

“Some of them know that that’s how they’re contributing to their family, so they look forward to picking up the food and taking it home,” he said.

And the program comes full circle, Cloke said. District schools hold a food drive for Community Food Share before classes let out for winter break. The annual drive collects about 35,000 pounds of food annually, said Cloke, who is part of the committee that organizes the drive.

“Sometimes we’ll see some of the food they’ve gotten in Food Share coming back,” he said. “Even the kids here need to understand the importance of giving back.”