

Verde Independent

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Town hall focuses on Verde Valley's vulnerable populations

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Staff Reporter

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Community volunteers are filling the cupboards and pantries of the Verde Valley's hungry with more than the typical processed food box fare.

About two dozen community members gathered at the Cottonwood Recreation Center Wednesday to discuss this and other ways businesses, individuals and government can help "vulnerable populations."

The Yavapai Food Neighbors Project was one example of actions individuals, as well as nonprofit organizations, can take.

A product of Harvey Grady's Yavapai Food Council, the project utilizes a network of community donors who fill green sacks with food to supply emergency food pantries.

He said 1 in 4 Verde Valley adults is hungry or food insecure, compared to the national ratio of 1 in 5. Children see a similar disparity.

"In our county and most of rural Arizona we rank with the Deep South in terms of hunger," he said.

Each trip to the grocery store for two months, these "food neighbors" are buying an extra item that they themselves would eat and adding it to the green sack.

The full bags are picked up, delivered to collection centers, sorted and distributed within a matter of hours, Grady said. In Cottonwood, it's at the Christian Assembly on Mingus Avenue.



Tara Jackson runs the Arizona Town Hall at the Cottonwood Recreation Center on Thursday. VVN/Vyto Starinskas



Janet Regner, Director, Community Services, Coconino County

What government can do

1. Stop predatory lending. Title or payday loans with 500 percent interest are designed with default in mind.

Emergency food providers line their shelves with healthier options than what usually comes in, Grady said, and can fill the gap between where donations run out and families still have needs.

The approaching holidays are usually a robust time for food pantries, but organizers know there is a predictable lull as soon as January hits.

2. Set minimum wage at \$10.50/hr. Businesses like Northern Arizona Healthcare have seen greater retention and productivity by setting a competitive minimum wage.
3. Increase the caps on tax credit donations. This program has grown by 10 percent annually since it started in 1998.

-- Janet Regner, Director, Community Services, Coconino County

Repealing Proposition 300, longer playground hours and higher minimum wages were some of the diverse suggestions that came from the April Town Hall on vulnerable populations.

Attendees of that event came to consensus on three legislative actions that would prevent families and individuals from falling into crisis, said Janet Regner, Coconino County community services director.

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"We have to make some structural changes in Arizona to help people have hope," Regner said.

A minimum wage of \$7.25 in Cottonwood is more than \$2 short of a living wage.

People earning these wages can spend all day getting to and from the services bridging that \$2 gap, said Rev. Richard Morrison, Canon for Ecumenical and Community Relations for the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona.

"It's obvious that one-stop shopping for social services would be an advantage in many of our communities," he said.

Find more information on Town Hall events at aztownhall.org.

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