

The Food Bank of WNY



In July IVC Regional Director Minnie Wyse met with key Food Bank staff including President & CEO Marylou Borowiak, Human Resources Manager Christa DiPizio, and Warehouse Manager Justin Guerino to review their successful inventory bar coding conversion. Food Bank obtains nutritious food and support resources from local public and private sources and distributes these to feed the hungry in Western New York through their various member agencies throughout Erie, Niagara, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties. Food banks have a myriad management issues including federal and state guidelines, delivering food while it is still fit to eat, and providing the essentials of a balanced diet. Food Bank's skill almost makes the job look easy -- but in reality it is anything but. It is a constant juggling act with welcome but unplanned phone calls at all times of day and night -- a food oversupply which will perish shortly if not used quickly, merchandise still good but nearing the end of its shelf life or just a sudden donation of food and support resources. On any day half the inventory is in the 91 Holt Street warehouse and the other half is in motion on trucks and in transit. Overall, 16 million pounds of food will be handled by Food Bank this year and be delivered to partner agencies and hungry people with less than 1% waste. In short, it is a miracle of planning, execution and logistics.

What makes it all the more amazing is that the Food Bank keeps squeezing more and more out of the warehouse space it has occupied since 1989. In the last 5 years no staff has been added but the amount of food handled has increased by over one-third from 12 million to 16 million pounds. They keep innovating to be more efficient. One example is Food Bank formerly would bring all food into the warehouse and distribute from there but now they try to direct ship from the supplier to the end user as often as possible. Eighteen months ago they received a \$500,000 grant from the Ralph C. Wilson Foundation partly to add 300 more pallet positions, equal to about 15 trailer-loads of space, but also to help reorganize the warehouse for greater efficiency. Even with additional space the warehouse inventory is in constant motion -- new inventory must be rotated in behind the existing stock so that nothing goes stale. General Manager Justin Guerino says that his "warehouse people are the best chess players in the world -- they are always planning several moves ahead." So as part of the Wilson funded project they established a better logistical layout to optimize the daily pick routes. Food Bank is one of only two food banks in the US to make use of "gravity" shelving so that pallets slide forward when space is created by taking a pallet from the rack. To speed processing they put controllable and uncontrollable inventory in different parts of the warehouse. And they gave a new try to an idea that had been discussed but not deployed by Food Bank for nearly 20 years because it would be hard to implement -- bar coding to improve efficiency and recordkeeping accuracy in the warehouse.

And by happy coincidence, IVC Buffalo volunteer Bill Thomson became available at just the right time with his work experience to join the team and provide the extra resource and push to finally implement inventory bar coding. Food Bank President & CEO Marylou Borowiak stated that "we needed someone to be focused

on bar coding since Food Bank staff gets pulled in so many directions and IVC fee for a volunteer was minimal for someone of Bill's experience." Bill learned about Food Bank operations and warehouse management, worked with the software distributor evaluating available software, developing timeline schedules for hardware and software installation, devising a rack numbering scheme unique to Food Bank's needs, and, with Warehouse Floor Manager Glenn, developing a comprehensive user manual to train employees on how the system worked. "A lot of things had to come together before the switch-over" Bill noted "and Justin and his team were key to getting the various tasks done." Regional Director Minnie Wyse said "IVC volunteers helping not-for-profits which serves the poor and underprivileged in our community while offering the volunteer a meaningful spiritual reflective experience is the heart of IVC. It's the combination of volunteer service and spiritual growth that makes it so meaningful." From the volunteer's viewpoint, Bob says "Food Bank has changed me by making me part of the fabric of the organization."

