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CONCORD -- HOUSED IN A ONE-STORY industrial park building, the Belknap-Merrimack County Community Action Program food warehouse in Concord is unremarkable from the outside, but inside it's a lifeline to senior citizens.

"It means everything," said Evelyn Rowell, 70, of Pembroke, who said she is looking for work and has only recently had her own vehicle to get to the USDA-funded warehouse .

"They've been delivering to me because I didn't have transportation for the last three years since I've been living down in Pembroke. I would have went without eating if they didn't deliver at that time," she said. "I think this is a great place," she said.

In another part of the 2 Industrial Way cluster of buildings that house CAP, young mothers and their children up to age 5 are getting nutrition education along with vouchers for healthy food.

"It helps a lot with the milk and the eggs," said Christine Wheeler, 21, of Boscawen, while her 18-month-old son Landen played nearby. Landen is showing a preference for chicken nuggets and hot dogs, but Wheeler's partner, Tyler Weeks, 25, said, they keep presenting Landen with healthy choices until he eats them.

"He likes veggies, fruits, dairy products," Wheeler said. "We get three vouchers a month and then one for veggies and fruits."

Rowell and Wheeler are at opposite ends of the spectrum of services offered by Belknap-Merrimack Community Action Program, which has a \$30 million a year impact on the communities it serves.

Standing in the CAP food warehouse last week, U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass, R-N.H., said, "You're looking right now at the fabric of the safety net in America."

"The people that you see here today, working on nutrition, on health care, on all kinds of different services, energy, transportation, it all knits together," he said."

The congressman said he accepted an invitation from the CAP nutrition program because "In Washington, we make decisions about big issues every day, but it's important to understand exactly what the impact of those decisions are.

"I can make a more informed decision if I understand how the program works and how important it is," Bass said.

CAP Executive Director Ralph Littlefield said the private, nonprofit program matches federal grants by raising in the community about 20 cents of every dollar it spends. And it does that with

just 4 percent overhead, he said. The food warehouse is staffed by volunteers.

"We're funded also by the cities and towns in Belknap and Merrimack counties; we're funded by county government; we're funded by United Ways; we're funded by private donations," Littlefield said.

"To make it all work, you have to get a number of different programs together and operate them as a group to make it financially feasible," he said.

"We're an umbrella organization," Littlefield said. So programs for women and children, the elderly, energy and transportation, share joint administration.

"Our overall budget's about \$30 million," Littlefield said. "A large proportion of that is direct benefit to our clients, but those benefits for the WIC program and others, we're buying food from local grocery stores, things of that nature. If it's fuel assistance, we're making payments to the fuel vendors or the electric companies or the people who sell wood in their community.

"So a lot of the money that Community Action has goes back into the private sector, but it's all geared toward providing assistance to the folks that we serve," Littlefield said.

Susan M. Wnuk, CAP's community health and nutrition services director, said the USDA food program reaches 40,000 households statewide.

The Belknap-Merrimack CAP's Women, Infants and Children program, has a monthly caseload of 4,700 and tallies 8,000 individual cases each year that it serves through the Concord office and 19 other WIC sites in four counties.

A central kitchen turns out 1,500 meals a day of Meals on Wheels and Congregate Meals for seniors.

At the warehouse Monday, client Rowell said she gets several boxed of food every two months, which lasts about six weeks. "I get \$24 for food stamps and that's what has to hold me until I can get food again," she said.

Another client, Walter Scott, 61, of Salisbury, said he was laid off in November and is still looking for work. As a volunteer filled his cart with cheese, rice, beans, cereal, juice and other staples, Scott said, "I've got a family of three."

"It helps out a lot on the food bill," he said.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program is available to those age 60 and older. Statewide, CAP serves about 6,500 through that program.

The pantry warehouse is also stocked with food purchased by the U.S. Department of

Agriculture's Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program, but the warehouse recently got a donation of apples from Gould Hill Orchard in Concord.

"It goes to food pantries for people that might not be eligible for other programs, Wnuk said. "Oftentimes, it's families trying to get food to eat for the month," she said.

Boxes contain peanut butter, pasta, cheese, juice, boxed UHT milk. A family gets a box once a month. Children's packages get additional milk and juice.

The CAP program also runs six elderly housing facilities with 230 units in Belknap and Merrimack countities