

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Hundreds of miles to hope: Food bank aids remote southern Utah

By Julia Lyon

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Cahone Mesa • A 10-year-old computer sits in a box in Julia Nakai's shed, still unused a decade after her family hoped to plug it in. Electricity hasn't arrived at her family's lonely house on the Navajo Reservation in southeastern Utah, where having the speed of the Internet or the cool of a refrigerator can seem like an impossible dream.

On a good night, when there's a few drops of gas left to power the generator, the family might watch a Jackie Chan movie in the one-room uninsulated house. The food, until it runs out, is generally room temperature.

Each month Nakai lines up with neighbors and friends for a few boxes of donations from the Utah Food Bank at the most remote location visited by the organization, 350 miles from its Salt Lake City warehouse.

Boy Scouts and church groups that collect cans probably don't realize some of their bounty travels to a little house shared by as many as nine people, where Nakai, 51, worries about centipedes biting her young grandchildren.

"I really need electric, so I can have fresh meat," she said on a recent Friday, sitting in her truck at the Cahone Mesa food bank pick-up.

She gave most of the frozen items to a friend, 55-year-old Freida Charley, who has electricity at her home about two miles away, though the walls shake when the wind blows. She, too, was caring for grandchildren. No one in her house currently has a job.

About 350 people in Nakai's community rely on the monthly visits by the long, white Utah Food Bank truck, which has been traveling to their desolate area of the reservation since 2008. The Four Corners mobile food pantry began about five years ago when the food bank expanded its truck fleet, allowing the organization to extend its reach.

A nutrition assessment of seniors had shown the older population was not eating a balanced diet, said Sylvia Zhonnie, supervisor at the Red Mesa Senior Center, one of the reservation drop-off sites. Volunteers unloaded watermelons two-by-two last Friday, laying them next to boxes of "baby doll" tomatoes.

"They don't always have money to buy the food to last them for the whole month," she said.

But food isn't the only coveted item. Many people waiting for donations urgently requested detergent for clothing. Lucinda Slim, 31, who works as a dental assistant, happily spotted boxes of donated toothpaste as she waited with her mother-in-law. Some of the children at the dental clinic say they have neither toothbrush nor



Photo by Chris Detrick | The Salt Lake Tribune As cars line up waiting to receive their food, Ryan Begay gives a family a watermelon from the Utah Food Bank at the Navajo Nation Red Mesa Senior Center in San Juan County Friday August 20, 2010. About eighty families from this area are served by the Food Bank every month.

toothpaste at home.

Victims of the recession, Slim and her husband moved back to the reservation after her husband lost his job in Tucson. Now they are both employed, but still need help with food. The truck's arrival is a comfort.

"They know where we are," she said. "They come out here in the middle of nowhere."

She's not exaggerating about the isolation. Both nearby Bluff and Montezuma Creek, where Nakai goes to do her laundry, can count their residents in the hundreds. Many reservation dwellers drive as many as 60 miles or more to Cortez, Colo., to go grocery shopping once a month, passing swaths of empty scrub land occasionally bisected by power lines or punctured with oil rigs. The food at the convenience stores in the small towns is overpriced, said Susan Blackhorse, 66, and sometimes out-of-date.

She grows her own vegetables, such as Indian corn, cucumbers and radishes, though the grandmother drives about 15 miles to the monthly food bank at the Red Mesa Senior Center for extra help.

"I think a lot of people depend on it," Blackhorse said. About 650 people seek help from the Red Mesa or the Cahone Mesa food drop-off each month. Waiting in their cars or near the food bank truck, they often spoke to each other in Navajo. Some of the seniors spoke almost no English at all.

Blackhorse was one of many who attended an Indian boarding school where "they wanted us to get rid of our language." If students spoke Navajo, dorm mothers put soap in their mouths or forced them to scrub floors, she said.

Now schools teach Navajo, but sending children away to study is still a necessity for some of the more isolated residents like Nakai.

Rather than living in her house without electricity or hot water, four of her children attend boarding school. One benefit of their past isolation at home, she figures, is that they weren't playing video games.

If all goes well, the family will soon move into a new house built with help from the Utah Navajo Trust Fund. Only a few steps from their old home, the sun will no longer come through chinks in the ceiling. The bathroom wall won't be lined with plastic to keep out the cold.

"I don't want to live here for the next winter," she said.

But as for the electricity? Who knows. The computer may have to keep waiting.

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— Would you like to donate food or other items to the Utah Food Bank? Go to [www.utahfoodbank.org](http://www.utahfoodbank.org) or call 801-978-2452.

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