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Boy Scouts on the hunt for food

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Doug Samo has a simple reason for collecting food each year through the Boy Scouts of America's annual April food drive.

"It makes me feel good that I can help people in need," said Samo, 15, of Ross.

Samo, his brother, Joe, 9, and Western Pennsylvania's more than 8,000 other Scouts will feel even better this year because of an unprecedented boost of \$125,000 from the UPMC Health Plan.

The money -- which will aid collection efforts and help inform people about the more than 120,000 local people who rely on donated items -- was given Monday to The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, the food drive's beneficiary. It was part of a larger contribution by UPMC Health Plan of \$250,000 to the food bank.

"It's our most basic need in health care, to have food, and we're fortunate in our community to have help providing food," said Diane Holder, president of UPMC Health Plan.

This year, area Boy Scouts hope to raise more than \$3 million worth of food, beating last year's record \$2.7 million. That would contribute a sizeable amount to the food bank's \$17 million in annual donations.

Scouts will go door-to-door collecting packaged food donations throughout April. In the last two weeks of the month they will be at 56 Western Pennsylvania Giant Eagle stores collecting additional items. Since beginning the food drive in 1987, more than 71 million food items have been collected.

"When a Scout knocks on your door asking for food, or your workplace holds a food drive, please step up and give," said Alf Tuggle, Scout executive of the Greater Pittsburgh Council. "Together we can make a difference in the lives of hungry people in our community, many of them children."

Because many corporate workplaces are unable to host a food drive, the Greater Pittsburgh Boy Scouts Council is launching its first "virtual food drive." Employees can "shop" for food items on the Internet. No food will be brought to workplaces. To learn more, contact the food bank at 412-460-3663, ext. 282.

HUNGER BY THE NUMBERS

120,000 -- Local people served by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank monthly

36 -- Percent of people served who are children

17 -- Percent of people served who are elderly

350 -- Charitable food assistance agencies that distribute food for the food bank

260,000 -- Employees in companies, government agencies, schools, churches and organizations who donate to the Boy Scouts' food drive

71 million -- Food items gathered by the Scouts since they began their drive in 1987

\$1.49 -- Value of each pound of food donated to the food bank

Source: Boy Scouts of America Greater Pittsburgh Council; Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank