

# Dogged old women hawk food that's free from Food Bank, U.S. government

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pantries, free meal and supplemental food distribution programs in the Tenderloin where anyone who signs up and shows ID can get free food.

This year the Food Bank will distribute 46 million pounds of all kinds of food to 450 agencies — pantries, meal programs and charitable organizations — for redistribution throughout the city, 15 million pounds more than three years ago.

Forty-five minutes later the street sellers are gone, dispersed by two Central Market CBD street guides. One guide, Nick Hitchko, explains, "We get complaints — we work for the property owners, and they feel the sellers interfere with business. We get complaints from passers-by, too. People say this food should be going to the homeless, that it isn't

right to sell it."

Hitchko acknowledged that the sellers aren't aggressive and offered that he was not there to hassle anyone. "Some of them are 70 or 80 years old. You wonder what's going on. We just ask them to move to another district."

In fact, for the past several months the women have been chased from U.N. Plaza on market days by uniformed SFPD officers. Frequent market visitors have observed the confrontations: officers sheepishly rousting the old women, who, in turn, pack their sale items in small rolling carts and determinedly push off to other venues. But they've got their spots and this is one of them. They'll be back.

By 11 a.m. that Wednesday, the women had returned to the front of the Grant Building, their produce, dairy and dry goods spread on the sidewalk bricks. Business was brisk at a buck a throw for whatever they have: 3-pound

bag of oranges, 4 pounds of potatoes, 2-pound blocks of American cheese, a pound of peanut butter, box of cereal and other items. A dollar store right there on the sidewalk.

Heart of the City Co-Manager Christine Adams knows about the women. "Yes. We've photographed them. I confiscate their produce when I can. I don't want anyone getting food poisoning and blaming it on us. They're selling free food that should be going to people in need," she said. Adams conceded the problems are complex and the women dogged.

The following week the story repeated itself with the CBD guides moving the women off Market Street. They decamp to the edge of the farmers' market, but security moves them off U.N. Plaza and they return to Market Street.

In the gathering crowd are some shoppers — one woman in a wheelchair buys a jar of peanut butter for a dollar as an angry middle-aged man shouts, "That food's American, it was meant for Americans."

Then in jumps a man who said his name is Al and that he's homeless. He defends the women and doesn't begrudge them making a buck or two.

"Hell, they provide a service," he says. "I can't always get to a food giveaway and they hassle me anyway if I forget my ID. So, for a buck, I can get a box of cereal here and I don't go hungry then."

This ongoing scene of street selling, rousting, dispersing and regrouping changed April 18 when Tenderloin Station officers and two representatives of the San Francisco Food Bank confronted the sellers. Capt. Joe Garrity called it "a prevention and intervention strike."

"We had a bilingual speaker from the Food Bank and we told these women they were violating the law," he said. No one was arrested and no citations were issued, but the sellers' perishable items were confiscated. Garrity intends for his officers to keep watch on the Wednesday market action.

"If the selling of these products continues, we'll cite and prosecute," he said. In his opinion, none of the food being sold had been taken from any of the "well-run Tenderloin programs," which have signup sheets and check for ID.

Robin Woodland, director of marketing and communications, confirmed that Food Bank staff had seen the old ladies illegally selling commodity foods — products bought by

the federal government and earmarked for distribution to seniors, the poor and those enrolled in special nutritional programs.

"Today, the women were warned and the food confiscated. We'll monitor on a weekly basis. We think that consistent monitoring will stop this practice," he said.

The Food Bank will also begin distributing flyers in U.N. Plaza on market days alerting the public that it is illegal to buy or sell food received free from community agencies.

"We hope the economic market for these illegal sellers will dry up once people understand that selling the government commodity food marked for distribution by community agencies undermines the purpose of helping those in need," he said.

On April 25, the women returned to U.N. Plaza. Their carts were loaded with bags of potatoes, canned tomatoes and boxes of cornflakes. This time they fanned out in groups of two or three at Market Street at Seventh and a block away at the corner of Jones and McAllister streets. Cops and Food Bank reps were there, too.

At the triangle of Market, McAllister and Jones streets, a longtime notorious hot spot for the street sale of weed and crack, two large SFPD officers placed their hands on a small, elderly woman and began the effort to confiscate her food-filled two-wheel shopping cart. Moments before she had been offering to sell bags of produce and cans of vegetables to passers-by.

Now she refuses to release her grip on the cart. The cops patiently wait her out as Food Bank rep Shirley Chin speaks to her in Cantonese. Finally, exhausted, the woman gives up and sinks to the sidewalk, wailing and weeping. From the crowd that gathered to gawk someone says: "She's crying, but there ain't no tears."

The women were released with empty carts. The confiscated food sat in a 5-foot stack on the corner awaiting retrieval by an SFPD pickup. "It's going back to the Food Bank," a cop said. A quiet voice in the crowd piped up, "That ain't going to make them stop. It's their only means of hustle."

The Food Bank estimates 40% of the confiscated items came from pantry distributions and 60% from the federal commodity food program aimed at needy seniors. ■

Geoff Link contributed to this report.

**The Market Street side of the Grant Building is a popular location for the elderly women's traveling dollar stores. And their customers typically are people in need of a food bargain.**



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

A Tenderloin Station officer is at one of their popular spots as the usual suspects arrive, and he doesn't allow them to stay.



PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

## There's also a food stamp scam

FOOD for sale on the street can draw a crowd, even when the sellers' come-ons are low-key. On one recent day as the women drum business at the corner of Market and Seventh streets, some bystanders berate them, couching their anger in patriotic jargon. Others support the little old Asian ladies, drawing a picture of economic benefit and convenience for those who buy the \$1 items.

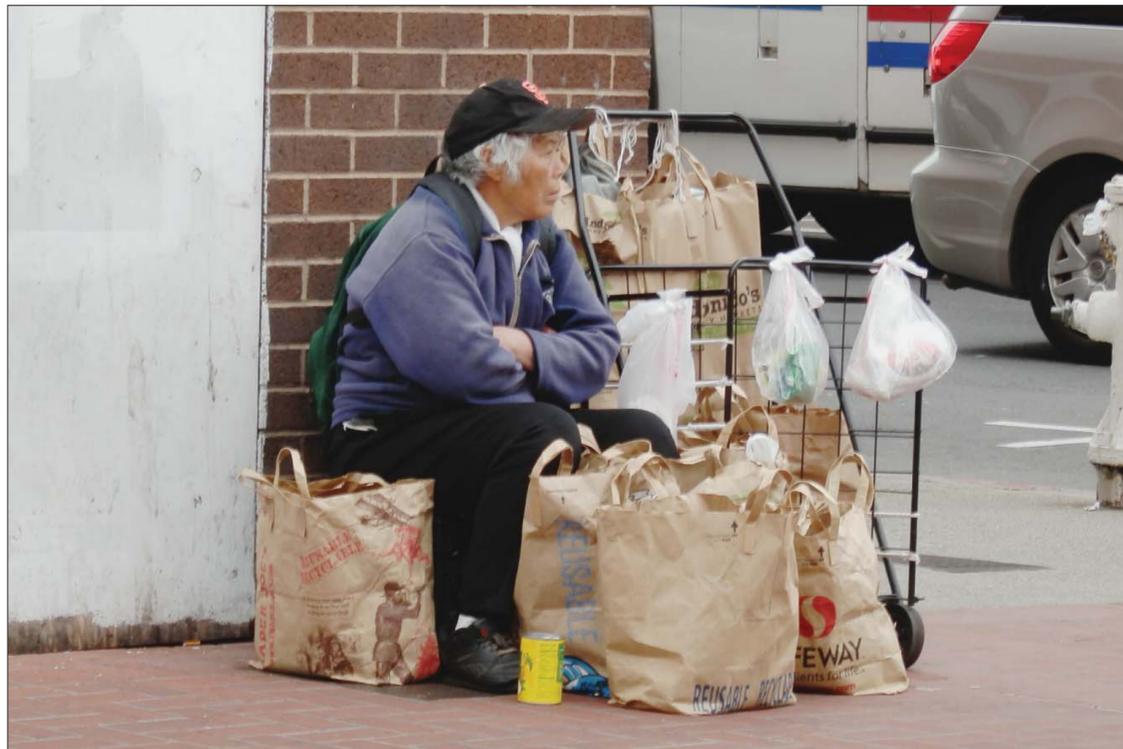
The women are approached by a Channel 2 newsmen, microphone in hand and TV camera sidekick trailing. The reporter fires questions, the women clam up, and they clearly don't want to be photographed.

From the street, Al, a vocal defender of the sellers and their sidewalk enterprise, chases the Channel 2 pair off the corner. As the men depart, he tells them that the real story is up the block, pointing to the confluence of McAllister, Jones and Market streets, where, he shouts: "They're paying \$100 cash for a full food stamp card. I know some people got whole stacks of them," displaying his right hand with a 6-inch spread from fingers to thumb.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that nearly 10% of food retailers traffic in fraud by swapping food benefit cards for cash.

Typically, a merchant will pay \$100 for a card with \$200 in value, swipe the card through the merchant system and sell nothing. When the federal government gives the merchant the \$200, the profit is pocketed and the fraud complete. ■

— JONATHAN NEWMAN



A Giants fan is surrounded by a daring array of items, way more than just three bags full. Should the sidewalk retailers run out, they can restock with her.

## Park sculptor sought

THE Arts Commission is trying to find Anthony Jerome Smith, the Tenderloin artist and former Cadillac Hotel resident whose outdoor sculpture "Untitled" was installed at Boeddeker Park in 1986, a year after the park opened.

The 5-foot-tall bronze, weighing up to 800 pounds, depicts a pair of hands cupped around a globe inset with 14 life-size, multiethnic faces of various TL residents, including Father Alfred Boeddeker (center in the photo above), painter Craig Lasha, then-Cadillac Hotel Manager Sarah Kearney and Richard Livingston (right), managing director of Exit Theatre.

Livingston, who remembers Smith creating the sculpture using negative plaster life masks, clay positives and the final bronze casting at an Oakland foundry, says many of the other models had connections to the Cadillac or Exit.

The Arts Commission selected Smith's design from among 100 submissions and paid him \$20,000 for the piece, which he worked on for 15 months.

The commission wants to tell Smith that when scheduled Boeddeker Park renovations begin later this year, his sculpture and other art in the park will be removed, stored, conserved and reinstalled.

If you know where Anthony Smith is, get in touch with Carol Marie Daniels, Arts Commission's project manager for public art and civic collections, 252-2588 or carolmarie.daniels@sfgov.org. ■

— MARJORIE BEGGS

