Volunteers pick apples, distribute to the needy

By SEAN KIM
Courier-Post Staff

LAWRENCEVILLE — Some 30 volunteers toiled Monday morning under cloudy skies and brisk winds at Terhune Orchards.

Volunteers for New Jersey Farmers Against Hunger were stripping apples from trees, apples that would otherwise go to waste, filling buckets and bags to be donated to the needy.

“I haven’t picked (produce) in 40 years, except in a supermarket,” said volunteer Darlene McKnight, 55, a life insurance saleswoman from Trenton.

“It gives you a whole new appreciation of supermarkets,” she added with a smile as she carried a bucket of apples.

But the results of her labor made her feel good, she said. “Even in this land of plenty, there are plenty of people that don’t have (much).”

“It’s an easy way to do a good thing,” said volunteer Ann Walker, 60, of Lawrenceville. “It doesn’t require much.”

“Of course you pay for it with your back,” her husband, Bill Walker, 62, said with a grin.

The crops they pick are those left over after harvesting, those that don’t pass muster for picky shoppers — perfectly edible food with minor blemishes — or produce that is too small or too big for supermarkets that like uniform sizes, said state Agriculture Secretary Art Brown Jr.

“It’s a shame to let it go to waste,” he said.

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By David Hunsinger, for the Courier-Post

Working to help others: Loading apples into a van to be transported to the hungry are (from left) Medine Campbell, Hurriya Campbell and Darlene McKnight, all of Trenton.
And there's plenty of waste, according to Farmers Against Hunger, which serves as a direct conduit from 31 farms in Camden, Burlington, Atlantic and Mercer counties to 44 churches and social service agencies, each feeding at least 100 people a week.

Some 96 billion pounds of food goes to waste in this country, while 12 million families go hungry, said Robin McGovern, director for the organization.

New Jersey alone has 292,000 children under age 12 who go hungry, said Joni Elliott, state coordinator for agricultural development.

But Farmers Against Hunger is a unique solution, the only hunger relief organization started by farmers, she said.

Organized last year by Terhune Orchards co-owner Pam Mount, the program is sponsored by the New Jersey Agricultural Society in cooperation with state agencies and Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

The program provides the “missing link” between farmers and distribution centers, Mount said.

Previously, charitable organizations would ask for donations in the wrong season or when leftover crops had already rotted.

Now they pick up the produce on a regular schedule or when they are called by farmers, Mount said.

Occasionally, volunteers strip the fields of crops after the harvest to help the farmers.

McGovern said by the end of the year, the program will have distributed 300,000 pounds of food from farmers and an additional 200,000 pounds donated by commercial food distributors.

Charitable organizations are appreciative.

"It really helps to stretch our food dollar," said Susan Weisneck, community lunch manager for Christian Caring Center in the Browns Mills section of Pemberton Township.

The center provides 400 meals a month, served at the center or sent to homeless people living in the woods, she said. An additional 300 to 400 families each month receive food baskets containing three days worth of food.

"They're excited to get fresh fruits" instead of the usual canned goods, she added. "Unless you have a garden or the money, it's hard to get fresh fruits and vegetables."