

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

How wood banks could help Mainers avoid an eat-or-heat dilemma

By Sabrina Vivian and Jessica Leahy, Special to the BDN

Posted Nov. 10, 2014, at 1:35 p.m.

Imagine a local food pantry or food bank. Replace the focus of food with firewood, and you have a center known as a wood bank. Like food pantries, wood banks aim to help community members with life essentials by supplying firewood at little to no cost to those in need who rely on firewood as a heating source.

As straightforward and tangible as these centers sound, fewer than a dozen wood banks are active across Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, with only one known to be consistently active in Maine. Recently, the School of Forest Resources at the University of Maine surveyed these existing wood banks in New England and then hosted the inaugural New England Wood Bank Summit.

Maine is known for its picturesque summers, but for residents, the winters are just as infamous. The ice storm of 1998 still manages to arise in conversations whenever a nor'easter bears down. Storms such as that of 1998, and the one we just had, are becoming increasingly frequent as climate patterns become more variable. Somber winter forecasts pressure Mainers to prepare for home heating needs every year, which is a substantial concern for the longest season.

Yet Maine continues to linger in an economic recession. With some of the highest electricity prices in the nation, coupled with grueling winters and economic hardship, low-income and elderly citizens often need additional home heating support when funds and fuel run short. Simply put, some of our neighbors are facing the choice between eating or heating.

The Cumberland Wood Bank in the Portland area is a success story, exemplifying the feasibility of wood banks in our state. Every year, surplus and donated firewood, including street trees, is brought to a donation site where volunteers gather once per week to process firewood. The firewood is then either sold to raise funds for fuel assistance for community members in need or given directly to households that heat with firewood. The wood bank has been active for more than eight years and continues to expand in size and outreach success with each season. It works off the support of volunteers and private donations without any state or federal aid.

Maine's socioeconomic factors suggest that needs exist for wood banks from low-income and elderly Mainers. According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data, just over 13 percent of Maine

people live below the official poverty line, with many more just barely managing to get by. We are one of the oldest states in the nation. The bountiful forest resources of our state could allow for many more wood banks to be developed in the future. Maine is the most heavily forested state in the nation, with 90 percent of it being covered by forest. Perhaps not so coincidentally, we have the second highest per-capita reliance on wood as a primary heating source.

Our University of Maine research showed that in all cases, local volunteers ran wood banks. Wood banks emphasized local aid — communities helping their low-income and elderly neighbors, growth of community spirit, and support for a local and renewable energy source. The average cost to start a wood bank, typically for a locking wood shed, was less than \$500 with the support of volunteer labor and donated materials. As with most projects, initial funding was a primary hurdle, followed by maintaining a stable volunteer base, sourcing firewood, determining eligibility, avoiding liability and preventing system abuse. However, our study also found that all wood bank organizers agreed that the benefits outweigh the hurdles.

Mainers should not be faced with an “eat-or-heat” dilemma. It doesn’t need to be this way. Other New England states have required logging contractors harvesting on state lands to deliver truckloads of wood to established wood banks. Low Income Home Energy Assistant Program, or LIHEAP, funds from the federal government have been used to support wood banks. Private lands and homeowners with culled street trees can contribute firewood to support wood banks.

Let’s work together and make this happen. Here is a call to action for community members to talk within your town to see if a wood bank may be useful. If there is a need to fill, step up to the plate. Initiate the development of a wood bank. Wood banks exist in New England, and there is certainly room for more in Maine.

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<http://bangordailynews.com/2014/11/10/opinion/how-wood-banks-could-help-mainers-avoid-an-eat-or-heat-dilemma/> printed on November 17, 2014