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Mother Branch

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Times Tribune staff photo by Gene Tupper  
Oneida "Mother" Branch prepares a food basket for a needy family.

## Hard times squeeze flow of donations

By Flynn Brown  
Times Tribune staff

EAST PALO ALTO — Oneida "Mother" Branch pulls out her black book.

It looks like a well-used, oversized Bible, its pages yellowed at the edges.

There, in her floral script, are recorded the names of hundreds of families.

For many, Mother Branch has often been the sole source of food, clothing and sometimes shelter.

Oneida Branch, 62, has fed the hungry with her hefty boxes of fresh fruit, vegetables, healthy sized turkeys and staples for more than 25 years.

She usually distributes more than 500 food boxes each Thanksgiving and again each Christmas, she said.

But this holiday season, inflation has taken a bite out of the holiday spirit of giving, she said.

"I am really trembling about the holidays coming up," said the soft-spoken, open-faced woman. "People just aren't giving as much as they used to."

Branch, who receives no government or foundation support, relies upon the generosity of individual donors.

"So far, things are very slow. By this time, I would usually have received about \$500," Branch said.

She has thus far received less than half of that.

"If I can't find the resources to help me maintain my operation, I will have to close up shop, and that is something I don't want to do," she said.

Many people are in grave need not only of food, but of a place to live, she said.

"I know of one lady who is in a wheel chair, who was evicted from her home. She had to go into a motel," Branch said.

"One young man took me aside privately at church, and, with tears in his eyes, asked me to help him find a place to stay and a job," she said.

Each holiday food box costs her about \$35. She and her helpers work for free, gathering and delivering the food.

She said she accepts donations of either money or goods.

Most of her recipients come from either East Palo Alto or East Menlo Park.

However, "if there is someone who comes to me in need, I will help them," Branch stressed.

Much of the food preparation takes place in Branch's small home, at 2584 Farrington Way.

She coordinates her efforts through the East Palo Alto Community Service Center, 1489 East Bayshore Road.

"They come as the need arises. We don't ask questions. When a person is hungry, you don't tell them to come back next week," she said.

The little storefront office where Branch receives many of her clients may be in jeopardy, too. She said she is overdue on the \$95 per month rent.

Yet Branch is steadfast.

"I have great faith. You're not really living until you live for others. And I have always been able to help someone," she said.

Mother Branch