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Health department closes church hot meal program

Joe Winter | Nov. 23, 2010

A church-run dinner program that serves more than 7,000 hot meals annually in a town of 900 in rural Minnesota has been ordered by health department officials to shut down until it can make $170,000 in renovations.

The impact of curtailing the Care & Share program in Emily, Minn., about 150 miles north of Minneapolis, was immediate. ?It was a shock when we heard,? said organizer Nancy Moritz.

As many as 100 people are served each night from the kitchen in the Emily Wesleyan Church. Some of people come from as far as 25 miles away, since there are few nearby towns.

Local food pantry officials had reported in August a spike in people coming in to request groceries, and some recipients of the Care & Share dinners say they would not have survived last winter without them.

Health department officials said that church suppers can continue to be run from the kitchen because they are private affairs, but once the scope is expanded and community members are invited, the kitchen area must be completely overhauled and commercial-grade equipment added to meet state health codes.

?It?s all about ensuring food safety,? said Colleen Paulus, environmental health services manager at the Minnesota Health Department.

The people providing the dinners in this small town have raised more than $120,000 to try to revive the effort before the Minnesota winter hits, said workers from the local Catholic parish, St. Emily Church.

The dinners were held each Wednesday by members of a few local churches and community groups, including many Catholics. Volunteers from St. Emily Church staffed the dinners one week a month, plus helped out another time each month when the local Lions Club hosted a dinner.

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