



Keeping the Larder FULL

U.S. food pantries are facing unprecedented shortages as governmental donations decrease. | LIZ WHEELER

Kay's husband walked out on her and their six young children in the fall of 1981. Kay was a stay-at-home mom living in a rented home. Funds and food were scarce.

The Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets from the local food pantry were God-sends. Although Kay was a proud woman used to a middle-class lifestyle, she needed the food and gift certificates.

"It's humbling to get a food basket," Kay says. "Because I had six kids it was very much appreciated, but it was humbling."

About one in eight Americans find themselves in the same situation as Kay, living below the national poverty level of \$20,000 annually for a family of four. During the course of a decade, about 40 percent of Americans will cycle in and out of poverty.

The slowing economy and increased fuel prices have made it more difficult for many Americans to continue to meet the basic needs of their families, forcing them to make tough choices between rent, utilities, medicine, and food. Holidays and summer vacations also cause more strain to the grocery budget when schools no longer provide breakfast and lunch programs.

Some families are attempting to cope with the food shortage by using government supplemental nutrition programs like WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and welfare. However, not all families in need qualify or know how to apply, and the programs often won't carry a family through a whole month.

In its annual study of hunger in America in 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicated that the number of Americans struggling to put

food on the table had increased to more than 35.5 million. "Millions of hungry Americans are the working poor, unable to make ends meet on minimum wage salaries," says Vicki Escarra, president and CEO of America's Second Harvest, the umbrella organization for the nation's food banks.

Now, not only are individuals like Kay facing "low food security," the nation's food pantries are in need of food as well. Bonus commodities from the USDA to food banks have declined more than 70 percent in the last three years due to a strong agriculture economy. In 2006, the value of this food support to food banks was down \$175 million from 2003.

Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan estimates inventory is down by 1.5 million pounds

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Above and opposite page: Students from North Park Elementary School in Chicago deliver food they collected to North Park Friendship Center's food pantry



Emergency Food Requests Increase in Cities

ADELLE M. BANKS

A majority of U.S. cities participating in a recent survey have seen an increase in the number of requests for emergency food assistance, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reports.

The Washington-based conference issued its annual Hunger and Homelessness Survey in December, saying that sixteen of the nineteen cities that responded to questions about hunger saw increases in requests for emergency food aid in the last year. In addition, an average of 17 percent of people seeking food assistance are not receiving it.

The report by the conference analyzed homelessness and hunger in twenty-three of America's major cities, including Boston, Los Angeles, and Miami. Nineteen of those cities said they expect requests for food assistance to increase in 2008. "Although 87 percent of our nation's wealth is generated in our nation's cities, hunger and homelessness persist in most of our country's cities and urban centers," said conference president Douglas Palmer, mayor of Trenton, New Jersey.

The survey found that the lack of affordable housing was the most common cause of homelessness for households with children. Other causes included poverty and domestic violence. For single individuals, mental illness and substance abuse were among the most common causes.

Twelve of the cities in the survey—or 52 percent—reported that homeless people seeking shelter are turned away some or all of the time. But that number is a marked decrease from 2006, when 77 percent reported that homeless were turned away from emergency shelters.

For more than two decades, the conference has documented the extent of homelessness and hunger. The twenty-three participating cities in the 2007 survey are members of the conference task force addressing those issues.

Other cities included in the study were Charleston, South Carolina; Charlotte, North Carolina; Chicago; Cleveland; Denver; Des Moines; Detroit; Kansas City, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; Philadelphia; Phoenix; Portland, Oregon; Providence, Rhode Island; Salt Lake City; San Francisco; Santa Monica, California; Seattle; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Trenton, New Jersey.

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of food from last year. Food stocks at the Vermont Food Bank are nearly 50 percent below 2006 levels while the number of people served has increased in twelve of the state's fourteen counties. One food bank in Texas is spending \$100,000 a month to keep its shelves stocked.

"There are a number of reasons for the food pantry crisis," says Joey Ekberg, executive director of the North Park Friendship Center in Chicago. "The farm bill is stuck in legislation. If it passes, it would release government subsidies to farmers, which would be passed along as food product donated to the nation's food banks.

If the farm bill doesn't pass, that's a huge hit to the nationwide food bank network. Also, food manufacturers are finding secondary markets for damaged and mis-packaged goods instead of donating them right away to food banks. As a result, donations to the Greater Chicago Food Depository are down 40 percent."

Every five years, the U.S. House and Senate pass a new farm bill. While the House passed its version last July, the Senate didn't pass its version until mid-

December. Working out compromises between the two versions could take months and even then the bill could still be vetoed by President Bush and sent back to conference, further delaying the release of needed funds.

Keeping the shelves stocked

Food drives, volunteers, and monetary donations help keep the shelves stocked at food pantries during the commodity shortfall. "Over the holidays we had ten food drives benefiting the Friendship Center. The food went right on the shelves and then out the door to clients," Ekberg says.

The North Park Friendship Center food pantry was started by North Park Covenant Church almost forty years ago. It became an independent nonprofit in 1998 and now, in addition to North Park, it receives support from other churches, con-

cerned institutions, grantors, and private donors. As well as providing food, it offers clothing and household goods to needy families through its Mother's Closet.

One of the ten food drives at the Friendship Center was led by Diane

Bonus commodities from the USDA to food banks have declined more than 70 percent in the last three years due to a strong agriculture economy.



Joey Ekberg, executive director of the Friendship Center, explains to second graders how their donations will be used.



Young volunteers pick corn for food pantries through the Gleaning Network.

Hawkinson, a second-grade teacher at North Park Elementary School (NPES), a local private school that is not affiliated with the church.

"I'm a firm believer that the season needs a balance, knowing that seven and eight year olds get into this want-want-want approach to life," Hawkinson says. "I think it's important that kids at a very early age learn how to serve and give to others."

When Hawkinson first began teaching at NPES, she started the annual food drive as part of a wants and needs unit for social studies. In the beginning only her class participated in the drive, but now the entire school sponsors the food pantry. This year, the program unofficially expanded when one of the parents, who teaches at another school, had her class collect food and donate it to the NPES food drive. Hawkinson and seven parents then drove the students to the Friendship Center to deliver the food.

"We had all the kids put food on

the shelves. They felt they were doing something and they also got to learn a little about Mother's Closet. Some people live day by day, providing the best they can for their needs," Hawkinson says.

The experience made an impact on the parents as well as the children. "It was very inspiring to see such young children get such pleasure out of knowing they were helping other children that are less fortunate," says Christina Stokes, mother of Chloe, one of Hawkinson's second graders. "I think it is a lesson they could learn and practice all year round. I think the next step would be for them to actually volunteer when some of the families come through so they can see the difference they can make in someone else's life. It was a wonderful experience for both the children and the adults."

Food pantries are essential for people like Kay to make it through an emergency. Yet even when well-stocked, they do not solve a community's hun-

ger needs. "Our clients can only visit us once a month," Ekberg says.

Clients choose their food from the shelves and leave with maybe a week's worth of food. "It's a cushion against hunger," she continues. "Many of them are the working poor, people who are working full-time, but they're just not making enough money to cover all their expenses."

Gleaning the fields

Some hunger relief organizations go a step further to provide nutritious food to agencies that serve the poor. The Society of St. Andrew (SOSA) is dedicated to gleaning America's fields and feeding America's hungry. Started by two Methodist ministers and their families in 1983, SOSA has distributed more than 330 million pounds of food to hungry people in America since then. Its two main projects are the Gleaning Network and the Potato Project.

The Potato Project salvages truckloads of commercially unmarketable

potatoes and other produce donated by members of the agricultural community. The food is then delivered to agencies that serve the poor.

“The Potato Project is the most costly part of the project because of shipping. Sometimes churches or other community groups may ask for a potato drop,” says Carol Breitinger, SOSA spokesperson. “The truck driver will unload forty thousand pounds of potatoes onto a church parking lot, and volunteers will come in as a group and bag potatoes into fifteen-pound mesh bags and organize with local agencies to come to the site to receive potatoes.”

“As often as we can make happen at a potato drop, we’ll ask if the local sponsor can help toward the shipping costs. Often we’ll just cover the cost,” Breitinger says. Shipping a semi-trailer of forty thousand pounds of white potatoes from Maine to Virginia can cost between \$1,800 and \$3,000, but provides 120,000 servings of food. “Quite often when a truck drives up in the morning, the potatoes are on tables that night.”

SOSA’s other main project is the Gleaning Network, which uses volunteers to glean produce from farmers’ fields and orchards. Instead of being left behind to rot, the food is delivered to those in need.

“We save fresh produce that

was going to waste after the harvest,” says Breitinger. “We use anywhere from thirty to forty thousand volunteers annually. Most are doing field gleaning after the harvest. Then they’ll bag or box it up and get it delivered to local agencies in their area. We save anywhere from twenty to forty million pounds a year this way. For every pound we are able to save, it will provide about three meals for a hungry person.”

Networking food banks

SOSA is one of the largest fresh produce suppliers to America’s Second Harvest, a network of more than 200 member food banks and food-rescue organizations. “When they’re able to



A semi drops a load of potatoes at a church parking lot where volunteers will bag them for local agencies that serve the hungry.

get it from us,” Breitinger says, “it also provides something their clients don’t get—fresh produce that’s so essential. More than 92 percent of money coming in goes toward the programs. Cost is a little under two cents per serving.”

America’s Second Harvest originally began as a way to reduce waste from restaurants and grocery stores. It now provides about 25 percent of what the nation’s food pantries distribute. “Now we’re buying food to meet demand,” says spokesperson Ross Fraser.

Second Harvest has “developed relationships with about every food manufacturer in the country. Big food companies know to call us,” Fraser says. Last year, one producer called them with a donation of four million pounds of tomatoes that couldn’t be sold.

“Every metropolitan area has a food bank. I would encourage people to get involved locally to help the hungry in their communities,” Ekberg says. “The hungry are not just in cities like Chicago—they’re across the nation.”

Years after her husband left, Kay is financially stable and strives to actively donate to the local food pantry in appreciation for how it helped her. “It was nice getting those baskets,” she says. The food pantry staffers “were helping people where they needed help.” □

How You Can Help

1) Pray for the hungry. Join with other members of your church, or start a small group specifically to ask God to care for the hungry in our country and around the world. Bread for the World has free Lenten resources to help you pray for Christ’s compassion on the hungry, including readings, prayers, and actions. Go to www.bread.org.

2) Make a financial contribution. “Money donated probably goes further than donated food,” says Joey Ekberg, executive director of the North Park Friendship Center in Chicago. “We’re a commodity distributor for Cook County’s food bank. I can buy food from the Greater Chicago Food Depository for approximately ten cents a pound. If you gave me five dollars, I could buy fifty pounds of food from the depository, more than the five dollars would buy at the grocery store.”

3) Volunteer at a food pantry. “There is always work here to be done by volunteers: helping clients through the food selection process; stocking Mother’s Closet donations; delivering food to the homebound once a week,” Ekberg says. America’s Second Harvest has a place to search for volunteer opportunities in your local community at www.secondharvest.org.

4) Sponsor a food drive. One website focused on encouraging young people to volunteer in their community is www.dosomething.org. It includes creative food drive ideas specifically targeted to youth.

5) Volunteer to go gleaning, or invite gleaners to your farm. To find out about gleaning locations or hosting a food drop-off site, contact Society of St. Andrew at www.endhunger.org, or call them at 800-333-4597. □