

## Food pantries challenged by growing demand

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A couple with a young baby and people of all ages and walks of life waited upstairs at the CEDA headquarters in Mount Prospect Monday, seeking assistance from the nonprofit community organization.

Downstairs, Jim Shatkus surveyed the contents of a storeroom packed to the ceiling with food.

"It goes out pretty quick. If you came here last week, it would have been empty," said Shatkus, coordinator of The Food Connection.

Local high schools collecting donations to give hungry families a real Thanksgiving dinner came to Shatkus' rescue this week. But like other agencies that serve the needy in the suburbs, CEDA, the Community Economic Development Assistance group, is challenged by a surge in people who can't pay for food even as obtaining donations grows more difficult.

"There are a lot of people who've never been there before," Shatkus said, adding that one longtime co-worker noted a "a level of desperation" among some clients.

The stagnant economy, increased cost of living and job cuts are resulting in a 30 percent boost in demand, according to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, a charitable agency based in St. Charles that assists 13 counties, including DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository, which serves Cook County, also reported 33 percent more families and individuals asking for help. And suburban Cook County food pantries are reporting a 50 to 90 percent increase in visits compared to a year ago, a survey indicated.

Community organizers noted that many people crowding into their facilities have just lost their jobs.

"It's not unusual to see people in the waiting room with business suits on. No one wants to be in their situation, but there is help," People's Resource Center Executive Director Mary Ellen Durbin said.

The newly unemployed include people formerly in the construction trades, hurt by the housing-industry slump. But the PRC, a nonprofit community assistance center in Wheaton, sees everyone from blue- to white-collar workers.

The agency's latest statistics from July through September indicate a 14 percent increase in food baskets given out to clients. This week, they'll hand out 2,600 Thanksgiving dinners with all the fixings compared to 2,000 in 2007.

The food pantry is so congested, "we're adding evening hours," Durbin commented.

Linda Blatnik, a social worker at the Libertyville Township Food Pantry, notices similar trends. The food pantry gave out 60 Thanksgiving baskets in 2007. This year, it will be 110 turkey dinners.

When asked what stories she hears from the new customers, Blatnik said "most have lost their jobs."

Even as the need grows, food pantries are finding donations are becoming a problem.

The Northern Illinois Food Bank gets most of its contributions from grocery stores, such as Jewel-Osco, and food manufacturers, like Sara Lee and Kraft, said Jarrod Daab, associate director of development.

However, some sources are tightening their inventories as a result of the hard times, forcing the food bank to find new donors.

"The biggest issue is keeping up with the need," Daab said.

In speaking with the organization's agencies, food bank officials note that 38 percent of households they help have one working adult.

But one salary or multiple part-time jobs isn't enough to survive for some families with food costs soaring and the up-and-down gas prices, Daab noted.

The NIFB gave away 22.5 million pounds of food in 2007 and expects to distribute about 25 million pounds to its members this year.

One encouraging trend is that individual giving is not slacking off, experts said, perhaps because people are more aware of poverty in their midst with the economic slump.

"People who haven't given in the past are becoming more aware," said Marilyn Mack, president of the Friend I Shall Help or FISH Pantry in Carpentersville.

FISH Pantry is experiencing a 20 percent increase in individuals looking for food.

"We get at least five new families each day," Mack said.

The intensified demand has created challenges. Once they ran out of eggs; sometimes they have to ask families to come back another day because the sheer numbers of clients overwhelms volunteers. The food pantry might have to reduce the quantity of food it gives to each client, but it won't send people away hungry, Mack said.

As with other agencies in the region, Mack is seeing a new type of client.

"In the past, it was people who can't make ends meet," she said. Now one recent visitor, a young woman, broke into tears because she had just lost her job and was embarrassed about seeking help.

"There's a great influx of people out of work," Mack said. "We keep throwing out prayers that the situation will right itself."