

North Jersey food pantries stretched to the limit

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Economists continue to debate whether the Great Recession is over, but at food pantries across North Jersey, the evidence is pretty clear: More people are in financial crisis now than were a year ago.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Will Eason, pantry manager at the Center for Food Action in Englewood, carrying supplies to a waiting client Tuesday.

Thus far in 2010, the Center for Food Action in Englewood has handed out 25,503 individual rations of a week's worth of food, according to Patricia Espy, the group's executive director.

"In 2009, we served 18,480 through the same period," she said. "That's almost a 40 percent increase."

The story is the same elsewhere: "Normally we feed 2,300 people a month. Now we're doing 2,800, and we've hit 3,000 a couple of times this year," noted Louis Francia, manager of the food pantry at [St. Paul's Community Development Corp.](#) in Paterson.

The spike in demand has also pushed the food pantries themselves to the brink, putting them on the verge of exhausting their resources.

How to help

Area food pantries say that since they can buy food in bulk, they generally prefer cash contributions. But all will gladly accept food donations. Among the most-needed items are canned meats (tuna, chicken, etc.), soup, canned vegetables, macaroni and cheese, peanut butter, jelly, cereal, dry milk, canned fruit, instant potatoes, juice, baby formula, diapers, bar soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes and supermarket gift cards. Here's how you can donate to North Jersey's major food pantries:

Center for Food Action

Online: cfanj.org (click on the Make a Donation tab on the left)

Phone charge: 201-569-1804 ext. 25

Mail: Send checks to the Center for Food Action, 192A West Demarest Ave., Englewood, NJ 07631.

Food donations: Contact Irwin Vogelman, 201-321-3142 or check CFA website for sites and hours.

CUMAC

Online: cumacecho.org (click on the Donate Now tab on the left)

Mail: Send checks to CUMAC, PO Box 2721, Paterson, NJ 07509.

Food donations: Call 973-742-5518 to arrange a drop-off.

[St. Paul's Community Development Corp.](#)

Call food pantry manager Louis Francia at 973-278-7900, ext. 24.

"We've seen a big increase in the number of people coming for other services, like help with their rent and utilities, so we've been putting our private donation money into that in addition to the government funds we receive," Espy said. "As of the end of July, we'd spent \$620,000. All of last year, we spent \$814,000 in financial assistance. If we keep spending at this rate, we won't have any money left by mid-October."

At the same time, food donations are down this summer, she added, forcing CFA to eat further into its cash reserves to buy supplies.

"We've been spending \$5,000 a week on food for much of the summer," Espy said. "Last summer we spent about \$2,500 a week."

While none of the groups say they've cut back on the food they're providing, several said they've altered the mix of products they give out.

"We've put a hold on all canned vegetables and we're pretty low on protein items," said Lynne Bruger, development director of CUMAC in Paterson, the largest food pantry in Passaic County.

"The items we most need are soup, cereal, canned or boxed potatoes and macaroni and cheese," Espy added. CFA has also been running through its supply of milk boxes at rapid speed.

Francia said St. Paul's biggest problem is the huge jump in the number of people seeking assistance.

"The numbers are just so large," he said.

"We're constantly asking people to donate food, but I think there's donor fatigue out there because people are always being asked to help," added Irwin Vogelmann, CFA's director of food resources and systems. "Plus, people who used to give are now coming in for help. Everyone is stressed."

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