

On eve of Thanksgiving holiday

Food banks running out of supplies in Detroit

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Calling the situation a “Katrina-like state of emergency,” the primary provider of food staples to soup kitchens, shelters, churches and pantries across metropolitan Detroit is reporting a dangerous shortfall in food donations this month. Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan needs two million pounds of food to ensure the agencies have enough on hand to feed 250,000 people on the Thanksgiving holiday.

They report record numbers of people are coming to the four hundred charities they stock, and because of a sharp decline in food and money donations, supplies are dangerously low.

In just three months—July through September—Gleaners reports they distributed 705,000 more pounds of food than the same period in 2006, a 13.4 percent increase. They note that the current inventory of just over one and a half million pounds equals only three weeks of food for those in need. Demand for food assistance saw a 22 percent increase in October 2007 compared to the same month in 2006 in Southeast Michigan.

The big deficit is due to a nearly one million-pound drop in food donations from national firms such as grocery chains and food manufacturers in the first nine months of 2007.

The agency’s budget is also strained by unusually high price increases for food they must purchase on the market. Money from the State of Michigan to purchase surplus food from farmers has been cut almost in half. From \$1 million four years ago the grant was reduced to \$630,000 this year. The state grant is expected to drop by \$150,000 more next year. The state itself is broke, with the Democratic governor and politically-split state legislature unable to resolve an outstanding budget deficit of several hundred million dollars. Gleaners has not yet received any money for the fiscal year starting October 1.

At the end of the year charitable giving traditionally spikes in the US, so the shortfall is especially troubling. For many reasons the comparison to Katrina is entirely valid. Like New Orleans in 2005, private agencies are scrambling in a major US city to support the population where government has simply turned its back. And like Katrina, the plight of the most vulnerable offers a reminder of stark financial and social dilemmas facing millions of families in the area.

Michigan has lost nearly 400,000 jobs since mid-2000. Seventy percent of the jobs were lost in the relatively higher-paying manufacturing sector. Michigan’s 8 percent unemployment rate is the highest in the nation. The home foreclosure rate in the state is the second highest in America.

Employees of another non-governmental aid agency, the United Way of Southeastern Michigan, told the *World Socialist Web Site* they are also experiencing record calls for assistance. In September they fielded almost 17,000 calls, up more than 90 percent from the previous year. They predict at least another 75 percent increase in

2008.

Another major food provider for charities is Second Harvest, which saves perishables from restaurants and grocery stores for distribution to 135 soup kitchens in Detroit and across Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties.

Development director Monica Horner told the WSW, “There is no question the need is up. All of us who do this work know this. It is important to note that the face of hunger has changed in the past few years from the homeless to the working poor.

“The calls are up here too,” Horner said. “We refer the people to the agencies we service. People say, ‘I have higher prescription prices I cannot pay, my food stamps are running out,’ things like that.”

The urgent need reported by these agencies underscores a host of social problems that have festered for more than two decades. Social programs set up or expanded by the federal and the state governments in the 1960s once provided assistance of last resort to unemployed and low-income families. These programs have been cut back or eliminated and volunteers and charities have proliferated but have struggled to reach those in need.

More than 90 percent of the agencies Gleaners works with are so-called faith-based entities. Bush has coupled tax cuts and elimination of social programs with reliance on these church-related volunteer organizations. With tens of thousands more job cuts scheduled in the auto industry in the coming months, the unsustainable pressures on these agencies spells further disaster for families in the coming year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several people at two of the longest-running charities in Detroit—the Capuchin Kitchen and the Coalition on Temporary Shelter (COTS.) Their stories reveal the human cost of these cutbacks.

Ernest Palmer, said, “The people are here because when they pay all their bills there’s nothing left. When the money is gone you have to find some way to cut back. I had to get rid of my car and start riding a bike. I used to work construction but the company went under. That was four years ago and I have not had a construction job since.”

In the US and in Michigan eligibility for unemployment benefits were curtailed and the money stops completely after six months out of work. In the early 1990s, Michigan eliminated aid to the long-term unemployed, putting on the street tens of thousands of adults without children at home.

WSWS reporters spoke to Mike and Carl, whose conditions are typical of many of those who rely on the Capuchin kitchen. Both are trying to exist on meager disability payments. Corporate interests in the state are demanding the curtailment of the federal and state Medicaid health care program, an action that would deny assistance to the poor and disabled.

Carl told the WSW, “The majority here are on disability or lost

their jobs. Most have no income and you see them coming here regularly. I come here because of a disability. I have been getting benefits for several months. As of yet I have no health insurance and I can't afford to go to a doctor regularly. If I get severe back or chest pain I just have to go to the emergency room."

Mike, said, "I'm getting disability assistance. I get blackouts from a tumor in my head. I have to deal with restrictions like staying close to home in case something happens so I come here to see people I know. My check only comes to \$623 a month and I have to pay \$500 rent and after that it's a wrap. I've got two kids and the money is pretty much gone right away. The social workers here told me I couldn't get food parcels because I have a place to live and income. I only qualify for \$10 a month in food stamps. What do I do when the money runs out?"

By the mid-1990s, the Democratic Clinton administration had severely cut the federal welfare program that assisted poor families with children at home. The purpose was to force workers to take any job they could find even if they paid below what was needed to support a family. In the past ten years, while the cost of living has risen 26 percent the minimum wage has fallen in real value. After adjusting for inflation, the value of the minimum wage is at its lowest level since 1955.

At the same time, cash benefits under the federal welfare program declined. The real cash value of aid to families with children has declined an average of sixty percent in the US. Michigan families on assistance have seen a comparable decline in the real dollar value of their monthly assistance. By imposing draconian restrictions to qualify for benefits, the number of eligible families has been cut by more than half.

Louise brought her son to the Capuchin Kitchen to eat. Her story illustrates the maze of problems navigated each day by millions of single mothers working for poverty wages in the US. "My low income brings me here. I work at a fast food restaurant because both of my kids are disabled. I need work part-time in order to spend time taking care of them.

"My son Roger here is three years old and he has lead (poisoning) real bad. They say he got the lead from the house where we live. My daughter has ADHD and they think she may also be schizophrenic. They would not give me help for years—they called her a 'problem child.' She is middle-school age now. It is only now; after all she went through, that I'm getting promises of help for her.

"At the Children's Center they told me once he gets the lead out of his system he will probably be having problems the rest of his life. I'm really angry about what happened to him. I bought our house when I moved here and no one at the time told me anything about the lead. The inspections didn't even bring it up.

"The case of the lead poisoning in my house was even featured on local television. Everybody was so upset about the lead and about the whole situation but in three years all the promises to help me fix things in that house have turned into nothing. This is why I have an attitude."

Douglas Doyle lives in a subsidized apartment at COTS. He told the WSW, "I have a degree in computer science and thirty years of experience in the field, but I have been outside the corporate world for three years. I think that is one reason I can't get a job.

"Also, by being a 52-year-old black male I think I am falling into the trap where they put certain people in society. They allege it is drugs but the majority of what you see here is unacceptable. The disabled, the elderly, the veterans are in this class that society will not

let in. For example, combat training does not translate into a job for veterans. The skills they learn are not usable in the corporate world.

"I think it is harder in a large urban area to get services. In a small town it is easier because there are less people. The large urban areas have just too many poor people to deal with. I have an apartment and several privileges here at COTS while I look for work. You will see families here who use this for emergency shelter all the time. The only way they can get the emergency shelter is if they go to a job program every day.

"I think a lot of services are not available anymore. Where are the cash assistance, the clothing aid, or anything else to do with money assistance? What you do see is an increase in food services all over the country."

The US Department of Agriculture, which administers the federally funded Food Stamp program, recently released new figures on hunger in America. A food stamp recipient receives about 78 cents per meal. According to America's Second Harvest (2001), 84 percent of their clients' monthly food stamps allotment only lasts for three weeks or less.

A recent USDA report based on US Census data said that more than 35.5 million people lived in households struggling against hunger in 2006, an increase of more than 300,000 compared to the year before. Especially noteworthy is the 11.1 million in households dubbed "very low food insecure," an increase of over one million people. Households dealing with hunger in the US have risen in six of the last seven years. Seventeen percent or 12.6 million children live in these households.

According to the *Hunger in America 2006* report by Gleaners, of those Southeast Michigan households served by the agency that were surveyed in 2005:

- * 71 percent live at or below poverty level and have an average annual household income of \$11,260 (The US poverty level is set at the ridiculously low level of \$19,200 annually for a family of four.)

- * 29 percent include children

- * 40 percent have no car

- * 37 percent of households include at least one employed adult

- * 41 percent of clients completed high school, 24 percent have some college or a two-year degree, 15 percent of clients held managerial or professional jobs

- * 13 percent are homeless, 11 percent include an elderly person

- * 38 percent use food stamps

- * 29 percent participate in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, indicating they are young mothers with babies and pre-school children.

- * 59 percent get subsidized school lunches, indicating they live in families earning below 150 percent of the poverty.



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