

US food charities overwhelmed by demand

Tom Eley
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As the holiday season begins, charities across the US are reporting unprecedented demand for food assistance. Driving the increased demand is the unemployment crisis, the charities say. They also cite state budget cuts, the foreclosure crisis, and the ineffectiveness of the federal-state food stamp program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Feeding America, a national food assistance organization, recently released details of an economic impact survey of some of its 63,000 member food charities. It found that between summer 2008 and summer 2009, demand for food assistance increased by over 30 percent nationally. Ninety-nine percent of participating charities reported an increase in demand and 92 percent witnessed an increase of newly unemployed workers seeking assistance.

Food banks and food pantries are reporting that those seeking assistance describe themselves as “middle class” or say that “never thought they would have to ask for help.”

“We’re hearing from more and more middle class who have never in their life gone to a food pantry,” Diane Doherty, director of the Illinois Hunger Coalition told the Associated Press. “They’re very, very frustrated and angry.”

Ninety-one percent of food banks report unemployment as a primary cause in rising demand, while another 79 percent report underemployment—those working short hours—as a contributing factor to increased hunger, the survey reveals. In contrast, in May 2008 43 percent of food charities reported unemployment as a critical factor, while 90 percent reported the high price of fuel and food.

The survey concludes that the nation’s food charities are not able to meet the needs of the hungry. Fifty-five percent of surveyed charities report that within the last year they have had to turn away those seeking help, and one in five did so “frequently.” Over three fourths say that they have had to reduce the quantity of food they give away, and about a third report that they did so often.

The shortfall comes in spite of a record number of volunteers and a record distribution of food between July of 2008 and July 2009. Feeding America’s network distributed 2.63 billion pounds of food in that time span, an increase of about 21 percent over the previous year.

Feeding America reported a similar 30 percent increase in demand one year ago.

The new report comes on the heels of a recent US Department of Agriculture (USDA) study revealing a record 49.1 million Americans in 17 million households lacked dependable access to adequate food in 2008—even before the full onset of the economic crisis. The Feeding America report suggests that the level of hunger in the US has risen rapidly since then. (See: A record 49 million Americans faced hunger in 2008.)

The Obama administration has responded to the mounting evidence of mass malnourishment in the US by calling on Americans “to help feed their neighbors.”

Obama will modestly increase the appropriation for the food stamp program by \$4.3 billion and that for school lunches by \$1.9 billion this year. These sums, which no one expects to reverse the growth in hunger and malnourishment, are minuscule compared to the trillions of dollars Obama has doled out to the finance industry and the estimated \$1 trillion his proposed “surge” in Afghanistan will cost over the next ten years.

“[T]he money is just part of it,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack sanctimoniously declared. “It is important for people in communities across the country to understand that this is a problem in their community.”

Responses to the Feeding American survey from local charities make clear that the scourge of hunger has spared no region of the country. They paint a portrait of a nation in the throes of a social crisis without parallel since the Great Depression.

The Harry Chapin food bank of Fort Myers, Florida, reported that it is serving 130 percent more people than two years ago. “Most of these clients are what the media describes as the ‘new poor,’ people that never had to ask for help before,” it reports. It blamed unemployment and the inadequacy of the joint federal-state food stamp program for the increase.

“Our pantries report they are serving more ‘working’ people,” a Peoria, Illinois food charity wrote. “The problem is by the time they pay their basic bills, such as gas bill, electric, clothing, etc., there is no money left for food.”

An Oklahoma food charity reported a 50 percent increase in demand.

“Our rural areas are being particularly hard hit because of plant closings, layoffs, downturn in drilling in the energy sector and crop prices,” it wrote. “People are teaching each other how to build fire pits in their back yards to cook because their utilities are turned off. Families are finding themselves needing food for the first time in their lives and our partner agencies’ resources are being stretched to their limits.”

Gleaners Community food bank of Detroit described a desperate situation. It calculates that a staggering 600,000 residents of Southeast Michigan “are believed to be at risk” of hunger, and fears that 250,000 children will go hungry next summer after the school year ends—and with it free and reduced-price lunch programs. Gleaners estimates that area charities can now feed fewer than 90,000 of these children. “To compound the crisis, in December an estimated 90,000 residents in Southeast Michigan will see their unemployment benefits expire,” it added. “The non-profit sector is asked to be the safety net for increasing numbers of people in crisis.”

Second Harvest food bank of Duluth, Minnesota said unemployment was the biggest factor in increased demand for its services. “The Iron Mines throughout Northeast Minnesota have laid off hundreds of workers,” it explained. “Duluth based companies such as an aircraft design company and those working with them have also laid off workers. Our increase is primarily unemployment and underemployment.”

A similar report came from a food charity in Maine. Describing the cause of increased hunger, it listed “Mill layoffs in Millinockett, Ashland closure, Marsadis layoffs, Baileyville layoff, Old Town layoffs, Washington County has high unemployment rate and no new jobs.”

And this from Montana: “Several lumber mills, railroads and oil refineries [have closed] since January of 2009. Many of the families displaced by the closure of those businesses are new to the emergency food system in Montana. All three industries provided decent living wages to families and have left them with nothing. Due to the vast area of our state and our relatively low population, individuals and families find it difficult to relocate or seek alternative forms of employment. It was only recently that minimum wage was raised from \$6.15 to \$6.90. This is what most individuals can expect to earn, if they are fortunate enough to secure employment at this time.”

A food bank in Elizabethtown Kentucky reported it was struggling to feed the hungry in its area, citing unemployment and a 66 percent falloff in corporate donations. “Agency managers report daily how their demand is increasing every day; a demand that they are not able to satisfy with the dwindling food bank product we have available to provide them,” it wrote.

Demand for food relief increased sharply in California and Nevada, where local charities coupled joblessness with the foreclosure crisis as the main culprits.

Food charities in Los Angeles and Orange country reported 30 percent increases in demand. Further down the coast in San Diego, the increase was more marked. “In Summer 2008 we served 46,000 individuals,”

Feeding America San Diego wrote. “In Summer 2009 we are serving 109,822 individuals, this is a 138% growth.”

A Fresno, California, food bank saw a doubling of its clients. “We are experiencing higher than national average unemployment, nearing Depression era rates upwards of 40 percent,” it wrote. “This year a severe drought impacted the West side of Fresno County where over 600,000 acres were left fallow as a result. Thousands of our clients each week stand in line for hours at a time in triple digit weather just so they can have something to feed their families because their agriculture related jobs have disappeared and their communities lack meaningful employment alternatives.”

Las Vegas saw an increase in demand for food assistance of between 121 and 168 percent. A local charity described the situation in the following terms:

“Las Vegas has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation, and Nevada now has the third highest unemployment rate of all the states...Much of the housing assistance that has been passed doesn’t help homeowners here...For a family to lose a job, then not be able to pay for the mortgage, then lose the house...all these factors can be crippling to families who otherwise would be getting by...The situation is just very bad here. Unemployment continues to rise, property tax values are poised to go down (reducing revenue for county social services), the expected wave of commercial property foreclosures has yet to hit, construction will soon be finished on the last major Strip property undergoing work, there’s talk of a special State Legislative Session to cut the budget yet further.”

The Fredericksburg Area Food Bank of Virginia noted the foreclosure crisis as a prime cause of hunger, and pointed out that the Obama stimulus package had done nothing to help. “Challenges include foreclosures, unemployment, and homelessness,” it said. “Some people are just trying to keep the roof over their heads and need food to make ends meet. School just started and agencies are getting calls all the time for everything, including school supplies. Foreclosures are still very much on the rise and people are being forced into hotels and whole families, even employees, are living in one hotel room. There is no help for these people in the economic stimulus package, no one is helping these people to keep their homes.”

A New York City food charity, the Community Kitchen and Food Pantry of West Harlem, reported that 250 of the 1,000 people who come each day are first time users. “The line has grown so long that when you walk outside, it’s overwhelming,” said Jesse Taylor, senior director at the pantry, told the Associated Press. “A lot of people are coming out in suits, they’re carrying brief cases.”

Thanksgiving, a holiday associated with food bounty, saw reports from across the US of long lines outside food pantries.

Hundreds lined up at food banks in the central Washington towns of Richland and Kennewick. “If this is any indication of the volume of individuals we’ll have during Christmas, it’s going to be a real challenge,” John Neill, deputy executive director for the Tri-Cities Food Bank told the *tricityhearl.com*.

A Hartford, Connecticut soup kitchen, Loaves and Fishes, was full ten minutes after it opened its door on Thanksgiving, with a line outside. “Everyone is feeling the effects,” Cynthia Hudson, who was at the soup kitchen with her brother, told the *Hartford Courant*. “It’s bad. It’s really bad on the poor.”

“We’re seeing people come in who normally wouldn’t be using our services,” said Judy Hart, Hartford coordinator for the Salvation Army. “It’s getting to a point where this is their survival.”

In west Texas, the Andrews Food Pantry was able to provide a Thanksgiving meal box for all comers. Some in nearby towns were not so fortunate.

“We have one agency that had to close because they couldn’t handle the need, they served 21 in January, and it went up to 92 in August,” Executive Director for the West Texas Food Bank, Hyta Folsom told a local news station. “Need has exploded this year.”



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