

# Need overwhelms Southern California food pantries

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Los Angeles and Orange Counties, long known as centers of Southern California wealth and glamour, are now home to more than half a million people seeking help from food pantries.

Both counties are listed among the country's five wealthiest, with Los Angeles at the top, and its southern neighbor at number five. The rankings were determined according to Total Personal Income (TPI), which the *Sacramento Business Journal* defines as "the income received by all people from all sources in a given year. It covers everything from employment wages to Social Security and welfare payments." Los Angeles stands at \$402.46 billion, while its southern neighbor rakes in \$148.37 billion a year.

Despite this wealth, however, the Los Angeles County Regional Food Bank now supplies approximately 600 food pantries throughout the county, or the equivalent of 1 million meals a week to a record 330,000 people a month. This represents a 73 percent increase since the recession hit its peak in 2008.

In Orange County, Second Harvest Food Bank reports that 480 similar charitable groups now serve almost 250,000 people every four weeks. This represents a 70 percent leap for the county during the same two-year period, and a 41 percent increase since last year.

According to *Reuters*, the Los Angeles Food Bank is now "delivering 33 percent more food to 875 charitable agencies it serves, but that's still falling short of need by 8 percent."

Advocacy groups have warned that the problem is likely to worsen as financial contributions and food donations, above all from the federal government through the Department of Agriculture and some grocery chains, dry up. In fact, several pantries have already closed due to the increasing demand while supplies level off.

According to Michael Flood, the Food Bank's executive director, that's more than a 70 percent increase from three years ago. This year, he says, the demand for assistance is far exceeding what is coming in.

"When you look at it over the course of the year, Flood

stated, "It's about 17 percent of the population that are struggling with hunger, making decisions between food and rent, food and prescription medications."

Federal and state programs that assist the needy are constantly being cut back, causing various charitable organizations to close their doors to the poor and the unemployed. For example, the USDA's Emergency Food Assistance Program has given the LA Food Bank 800,000 fewer monthly pounds of food than it did in January. Food pantries now receive fewer food supplies for distribution to the needy and, in fact, must now compete with other agencies to obtain less food for distribution at the local charitable centers.

One consequence: St. Peter Claver Center, which feeds between 1,000 and 2,000 people a month in mid-city, will close this week. It has been in operation since 1986.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Fred Summers, Director of Operations at the SOVA ("eat and be satisfied" in Hebrew), which provides food, as well as other services, to needy people regardless of their religion, ethnicity or national origin. According to Summers, SOVA distributed food to 11,808 people at its three service centers in the sprawling city of Los Angeles during one month. Fifty percent of its food distribution goes to the San Fernando Valley section of the city, with almost 2 million inhabitants.

Summers stated that every five years, "Congress considers and votes on the Farm Bill, and like any appropriations bill, it was originally conceived to maintain price stability to support farmers. If prices fell below sustainability, the Emergency Food Assistance Programs of the US Department of agriculture would buy huge quantities of food and distribute it to food banks throughout the country.

"In LA," he continues, "food banks, which distribute food to pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters, are going to suffer. But with the budget impasse that's going on, funds that had been allocated have not been released. Therefore, there's less available food for the food banks, and, therefore, less

available for the food pantries. The Republicans want to slash those funds by 50 percent.”

Summers pointed out that, in fact, last week the House passed an appropriations bill (HR 2112) for the US Department of Agriculture that, according to Foodlink America’s website, “cuts in half a dozen nutrition assistance programs.” Affected will be the WIC Program, the Supplemental Nutrition program (SNAP), the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), as well as the Emergency Food and Shelter program (EFSP), which FEMA administers.

Foodlink quotes Vicki Escarra, president and CEO of Feeding America: “Not only will the charitable...community be unable to meet the increased demand for assistance, we will have to cut back on the amount of food and groceries we are providing our existing clients, people who are barely able to survive from month to month. There will be less food available at the same time that more people are in need of help to feed themselves and their families.”

The passage of HR 2012 by the Senate would lop off 20 percent of funding for the TEFAP and bonus commodities would be slashed by 50 percent. Immediately the free food that the USDA distributes and is available through LARF would be reduced by 35 percent.

Summers noted, “We have seen already a steady reduction in the selection and quantity of food available through TEFAP.” He pointed out that barely eight months ago, SOVA would pick up 20 items from the LA Regional Foodbank (LARF), but during that last few weeks, “we have had less than half of that number. We never had to buy foodstuff. Up until two years ago, (USDA) had powdered milk. Now those things have disappeared.

“The contributions of the USDA account for 20 to 25 percent of our food supply. If that’s reduced by 35 percent....”

This has had a deleterious effect on SOVA’s own internal financial stability. Summers explained: “In the last full calendar year (2010), SOVA received 617,000 pounds of TEFAP food from LARF with a fair market value of \$421,509. Were we to lose 35 percent of that amount, we would face either a 10 percent reduction in our overall food supply or be forced to spend an estimated \$148,000 to replace it.”

It is likely that most, if not all, food distribution charitable institutions will face similar financial strains, which will play havoc with their internal finances.

Lest anyone thinks that the economic crisis has only affected the poor, Summers told the WSWs: “We’ve had a number of people who have come here the last couple of

years and said, ‘I can’t believe I am here. I’ve been donating to your organization for years, but I never imagined I’d have to come here and ask for food.’ We’ve had studio executives, people with high-end jobs who’ve had their own businesses, people from the entertainment world.

“As I have told people at meetings where people talk about donating food to ‘them,’ they are all just a few paychecks away from being in the receiving end. Nobody is immune. It’s not *them*; it’s *us*.”

Indeed, cutbacks in food programs are not the sole reason for the increase in the number of people seeking food help. The high unemployment rate in both counties—11.9 percent for LA and 8.5 percent for Orange County—is perhaps the biggest factor in the increase of those seeking food help. There have also been repeated cutbacks in government subsidies that fund other programs for the needy, which have increased the pressure on food distribution centers, forcing them to struggle to keep up with the increased demand.

According to one of the administrators at the Baldwin Park Bilingual Seventh Day Adventist Church, which served about 1,000 people a month, “This is a disaster.”

Dr. Jonathan Fielding, director of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, has publicly stated that, “It’s ironic and sad that in this land of plenty, so many people have to make do with so little.”

The enormous increase in people who need food brings them into collision with increasing costs and the reductions of government funds and surplus food supplies. Moreover, several food pantries have also suffered recent food recalls of tainted food distributed as donations by the food conglomerates.

Furthermore, the increase in the price of food has made it impossible for unemployed and underemployed families to afford what two years ago they could buy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the price of milk has increased by 21.3 percent. Eggs have gone up 43.9 percent since last year. But the cost of heating, gas and mortgage has also increased, eating into the income that families need for food. Some groups, particularly seniors, have seen their fixed incomes evaporate and have appeared in greater numbers at food pantries.



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