

Kentucky food bank faces rising social need, deep budget cuts

Ryan Rahilly
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The primary food bank serving eastern and central Kentucky has reported a staggering level of hunger and emergency food requests. As need rises, federal funding for emergency food assistance programs is being targeted for deep cuts or outright elimination.

God's Pantry Food Bank, headquartered in Lexington, recently released findings of a survey conducted in the metro-area's Fayette County. More than 450 clients visiting the six pantry locations in the county were interviewed March 21-23.

The survey collected data on Fayette County emergency food box recipients. Those who qualify for services receive four packages of meat, 12 cans of vegetables, fruit and soup, eight units of pasta, rice, cereal and other staple food items. Recipients say their food box lasts an average of 11 days.

The food bank serves 50 counties in Kentucky, helping approximately 211,000 people a year. In Fayette County alone, 161,000 pounds of food are needed each month to stock the five pantries servicing the area.

Statistics on the average yearly and monthly household income for clients give a sense of the deep social crisis gripping the state. Food recipients subsist on a yearly household income averaging \$8,760. From month to month, families must survive on an income averaging only \$730.

The survey found that "the typical person visiting a pantry is a white female in her 40s with a family of three. She may have finished high school and if she is working is likely earning minimum wage. She doesn't own a car so she must walk, ride a bus or arrange for a ride to the pantry with family or friends."

Working clients constitute 23 percent of emergency food box recipients in Fayette County. Forty percent of all those served are children.

Variables such as health status, age, education and employment of heads of households were also gathered in the survey. Forty-one percent of all clients are either disabled or in poor health, and 29 percent of clients have no health insurance. Only 40 percent have a high school diploma or equivalent, while one in three said they did not graduate high school. Yet others facing dire financial straits said they had attended college, including 5 percent who reported earning college degrees.

Many clients surveyed said they had to use other forms of

public assistance to survive. Of the 450 surveyed, 60 percent of households receive food stamps. However, a quarter of those respondents reported receiving less than \$99 a month; 23 percent said they received between \$100 and \$199 a month. Typically, these modest allotments last only two to three weeks, after which families seek help from the food pantries.

Recipients are often faced with very difficult choices. Of those surveyed, fully half said they had been compelled to choose between paying for food and paying their rent or mortgage in the last year. Half also reported facing the choice between food and utilities; 43 percent had to choose between food and medicine or medical care.

The survey reports that half of all parents needing assistance said they had to skip meals so that their children could eat. One in six reported skipping meals daily.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed Mandy Brajuha, a media representative for God's Pantry Food Bank.

"We've seen huge increases in demand," she said. "In 2006 we were serving 159,000; now we're serving 211,000 people."

When asked about the ability of God's Pantry to meet the needs of the communities, Brajuha said, "Is it ever enough when you're fighting hunger? We've been in this community for 56 years. We're reaching out to 50 counties serving some of the most impoverished parts of America. We're impacting about 211,000 people every year, but we also know that there are 330,000 people living in poverty in our service area. That's our gap. We need more food and financial donations to close that gap."

Brajuha warned, "Food donations are down—there's no bones about that. Food drives play a very small piece of the pie in what we do here."

The economic crisis has compounded social need in Fayette County since 2008. "We have about 275 partner agencies in our 50 counties. We've seen a 30-40 percent increase here in Fayette County in the pantries that we operate but, we're hearing that across the board," Brajuha said.

"More working clients are reaching out than ever before. More college-educated individuals. We've had people with master's degrees coming in who had been working, but were laid off. The working clients that we are seeing relied on overtime, so maybe they haven't lost their jobs, but all that

overtime got cut off. So now, what was working for them before is not working for them anymore.”

Brajuha said demographic changes have taken place since the economic downturn and the difficulty in meeting need for all clients. “There’s generational poverty, there’s educated, there’s uneducated. I think most people are surprised when they go into our pantries that it’s not exactly what they expect it to be,” she said.

“We recently purchased a warehouse in Winchester because we simply couldn’t move the volume of food we needed to move through this building. We distributed a little more than 22.9 million pounds of food last year. I never would have thought that many people needed that much food and we know there are still places we need to put more food. By no means do we feel like we’ve solved hunger—it’s like a constantly moving target.”

Brajuha cautiously expressed hope that they would be able to fill the gap of more than 100,000 Kentuckians in need of food in light of the spiraling economic situation. “We’re looking to move into the 30-35 million pounds of food range a year. Probably a few years ago, before the economy crashed, we could have told you that we were really close to getting everyone what they needed at 25 million pounds of food per year, but, now we’re nowhere near where we need to be.”

Clients who rely on God’s Pantry Food Bank also are in need of other vital services. “If you need food, you are probably going to need help with utilities in the winter, or other difficulties. So social services agencies make referrals to us. I’m always amazed at social workers and the work that they do,” Brajuha said. “So many of them are overworked and underpaid.”

The federal food stamp programs fails to meet the needs of many of Brajuha’s customers. “We see a lot of people who fall into that never-land. They don’t make enough to survive but too much to qualify for food stamps,” she said. “I’m dealing with a client right now whose husband recently went on disability. She used to care for children in her home, but now she has to care for her husband. That loss of income is drastic for them, and his disability check is \$10 too much for them to qualify for any government programs. These are people who have worked their whole lives. And now here they are knocking on our door asking for help.”

Brajuha condemned the stereotype that clients seeking government assistance or services from charitable organizations are “leeches” on society. “That’s not the rule, that’s the exception. For the most part they are doing the right things in life but have had bad things happen to them,” she explained. “For example, a family member gets sick and they have insurmountable hospital bills. I’m a gainfully employed adult, I have health insurance, but I had to have surgery a couple years ago and then suddenly, if my husband had say, lost his job—we would have been figuring out how to pay the mortgage or buy groceries.”

Brajuha said many face financial insecurities that could lead to needing assistance from agencies like God’s Pantry.

“Who of us is not a couple pay checks away from needing food assistance? People in these situations will cut down on their meals—if you don’t pay rent, you’re homeless, if you don’t pay utilities in the winter, you freeze to death, if you don’t take your medicine, you die. Often times people will cut down on food first,” she said. “There’s far too much abundance in this country for people to be starving. I know a lot of people think that just because people are not emaciated it’s not an issue, but there are a lot of people who fill themselves up with cheap food to fill a hunger spot that is not meeting their nutritional needs, hence the obesity epidemic in this country.”

Brajuha is concerned about the agency’s future ability to meet the needs of the hungry. The 2011 debt ceiling deal, spearheaded by the Obama administration, will devastate God’s Pantry Food Bank’s ability to provide food to clients.

“We’re very scared right now. We operate the Commodity Supplemental Food Program for our service area, which is a government commodity program designed mainly for seniors. There are also some wedges for young mothers who aren’t getting WIC that can also get the CSFP [food] box. It’s a monthly supplement, it’s an enrolled program, you’re in it until you make too much money or you pass away. The box is designed to fulfill the nutritional needs of someone of an advanced age. Now it’s on the chopping block in the federal budget to be absolutely eliminated,” Brajuha said.

“CSFP is a huge portion of the food we distribute here. That program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program—both of them are on the chopping block. They’re talking about 30-40 percent decreases; they’re talking about completely eliminating these programs. It will devastate us. We will have to work very hard to figure out how to make up ground. Fifty-five percent of the food we distributed last year was through those two commodity programs.”

The cuts proposed under the Obama administration also will affect the agency’s ability to transport the food to needed areas.

“We’re all on pins and needles here; not only is that a big portion of the food we distribute, but we get a big reimbursement from the federal government for the transportation that it costs us to distribute that food. That’s a quarter of a million dollars that could come out of our budget this year,” she said. “We fought really hard in 2007 to get an increase in funding in the Farm Bill for these programs. So, you fight so hard and get it, and now it’s like we’re back at ground zero.”



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