

Rhode Island food bank director: “We’ve seen an incredible, dramatic increase in need”

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This week in Central Falls, Rhode Island, the Progreso Latino organization launched its third annual Winter Community Food Drive. As in other communities across the state, the drive is in response to increasing food insecurity in the face of growing poverty and rising unemployment.

Almost 20 percent of Rhode Island children under the age of 18 live in poverty, and 29 percent of the state’s labor force is either unemployment or underemployed. Some 59,000 Rhode Island households are unable to meet their basic food needs, and demand at emergency food programs has increased by 58 percent since the start of the recession.

Conditions are even more dire in Central Falls, a city of about 18,000 just north of Providence. Central Falls is the state’s poorest city, with more than 27 percent of its predominantly Latino population living in poverty. The city was placed under state receivership in May 2010, and in August 1, 2011 filed for bankruptcy.

The city has seen the shutdown of its community center; the library was closed and reopened with a volunteer staff and reduced hours. Municipal workers and teachers have had their wages and benefits slashed. In a move unprecedented for municipal bankruptcies, retired firefighters and other city employees were recently forced to accept deep cuts to their pensions.

At the meeting at Progreso Latino on Monday, the Martin Luther King holiday, organizers announced that they were aiming to collect 6,000 pounds of food during the winter drive. Food banks have come under increasing pressure as government programs prove woefully inadequate to meet the needs of individuals and families hit by the economic downturn.

Mario Bueno told those assembled, “A lot has happened since three years ago. We never expected in our imagination that we would have a food bank here. Unfortunately, as we all know, the community center across the street has closed because of the Central Falls bankruptcy.”

Vernia Carter, director of the food pantry at Progreso Latino, said, “My focus is Central Falls, because I can only serve the families in Central Falls. I service the working poor. So people are coming to me that are making a choice between a gas bill, electric bill, mortgage, rent, taxes, car tax—all of these financial constraints that we have in Central Falls are creating a choice for people, who are thinking: I have to pay this bill because we need a roof over our heads, we need to be warm.

“So this food pantry is a lifeline for residents of Central Falls. I just want you to know that the families that are using it are the families that are really in need. And we also have seniors that worked all their lives, and now they’re retired, and they don’t have the funds to sustain themselves.”

Andrew Schiff is director of Rhode Island Community Food Bank, a statewide nonprofit agency that distributes donated food through a network of more than 250 member agencies throughout Rhode Island.

“We’ve seen an incredible, dramatic increase in need,” Schiff told the audience. “The number of people coming to emergency food pantries for help has grown month after month, and it continues to grow. We’re very worried about this winter, and a day like this points this out. Families face the high cost of heating oil, and this year, unfortunately, there is less and less fuel assistance to help them get through it.”

A number of area high school students volunteer at the Progreso Latino food bank. Sadio Malick Sokona is part of the Extended Learning Opportunity Program at Central Falls High School and is working with his class to collect donations for the food drive. He is an intern at the food pantry, unpacking canned goods and making up baskets.

Two years ago, Central Falls HS was launched into the national spotlight when teachers and staff at the school were

fired en masse under a “turnaround plan” modeled on the Obama administration’s education policies. The teachers were subsequently forced to accept deep concessions.

Stephanie Rodriquez, from Tolman High School in nearby Pawtucket, said she was involved in the food drive because she knew many people in the area are being affected by poverty and unemployment. “They’ve lost jobs,” she said, “They don’t have money for food, or to support their families.”

The WSWs spoke to Andrew Schiff following the meeting. “Four years ago, food pantries across the state were serving 38,000 people a month,” he said, “That was a lot. And now we’re serving 60,000 people every month. That’s a 58 percent increase since the beginning of the recession. And it’s all new people. In other words, it’s people who have never needed food assistance before.

“The people coming are folks who are recently unemployed, or have been unemployed for so long that they’ve run through all their savings. They’ve run through their unemployment benefits; that means they’ve been unemployed for two years. And many folks have no income, none.

“At the same time that we’ve seen this huge increase for the demand in emergency food, the enrollment in food stamps, the SNAP program, has increased from 80,000 people to 170,000 people in the state. And that’s income based, so that’s how many people actually qualify for SNAP benefits.

“On the one hand, it’s great that the SNAP program is there to help people. On the other hand, the benefits are very modest. So many families can’t get through a whole month with SNAP benefits. And then they turn to food pantries like this, because they’re running out of food.”

Schiff said the two biggest sectors affected by the economic downturn in Rhode Island are manufacturing and construction. “And those jobs are not coming back,” he said. “So people who have worked their whole lives in construction have no choice but to think about retraining for a new career. And that’s very, very difficult.

“We have a culinary training program at the Food Bank, which is very basic in terms of people learning kitchen skills, and we help place them in jobs in restaurants and cafeterias. We’re seeing lots of people who have worked their whole lives and now have been unemployed for a year, a year and a half, two years. But they’re starting over at minimum wage. So someone who was earning \$16, \$20 an hour is now working at minimum wage.

“Construction jobs paid well when the economy was strong. So in addition to the people who are unemployed, you have people who are underemployed, people who would love to be working in their former careers, but those jobs just

aren’t there anymore.

“Right now, the biggest thing that we’re concerned about is the extension of unemployment benefits that Congress has to make happen before February 28. There was only a two-month extension. So if they don’t go back and renew those benefits, 15,000 adults in will lose their unemployment benefits this spring in Rhode Island. We’re going to see a lot more people at food pantries.

“I’m not an expert in political things. I don’t know whether they’re going to do it. But I think that in almost every place in the country Congress has constituents who are unemployed. And if your constituency is knocking at your door and saying, ‘You just cut my benefits, what do you expect me to do?’ and there’s nothing to do for them, I think that facing that possibility I’m hoping that Congress will come back and do the right thing.

“You’re taking it away from them after two years anyway. But if you’re taking it away after six months of unemployment, the charitable system, food pantries, are not equipped to help that many people. This is an emergency system. It would be a real abandonment of people who have done nothing wrong, who are now unemployed because they worked in manufacturing and construction.”

Vernia Carter, the food pantry director at Progreso Latino, said Central Falls had been devastated by the shutdown of the food pantry at the community center this past July. She said she was worried that families that frequented that center were now not being served. “When the food bank closed, it was the saddest day of my life,” she told us. “And a lot of the families I saw there, I’m not seeing them here.

“So that’s a big concern because a lot of people haven’t gotten the word. A lot of people don’t have TVs, and don’t get the papers. So it’s more like trying to get the word out; trying to make sure that they know where I am.”



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