

Lowell Sun

Pantries struggle as need grows

By Annya Lott, Special to The Sun
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BOSTON -- Food banks across Massachusetts and in Greater Lowell, already hobbled by state and federal budget cuts, are struggling to meet the increasing demands of a faltering economy beset by the mortgage debacle and higher food and energy costs.

"We're literally in a crisis. Even middle-income families are on the brink too," said Andrew Morehouse, executive director of Western Massachusetts Food Bank. "If costs continue to rise, it's going to be even worse. The situation we are in now should be telling us we must do something about this."

Massachusetts' food banks serve 464,000 people annually with an average of 114,000 seeking help every week. Now those centers report those numbers are growing from 5 percent to 30 percent.

Morehouse said his food bank serves 100,000 people annually in 400 program sites across the Hamden, Hampshire, Franklin, and Berkshire counties. More than 27 percent seeking help are children under 18. Another 11 percent are senior citizens; 36 percent of households served have at least one working adult.

Morehouse estimates his food bank will distribute 7 million pounds of food by the end of the year -- a 23-percent increase over 5.7 million pounds last year. About 30 percent comes from private food donations.

In Lowell, the Merrimack Valley Food Bank is one of four in the state, including the Western Massachusetts Food Bank and the Greater Boston Food Bank. It distributes food to more than 100 agencies and programs, serving 22,000 people a month.

The number of people being served has doubled from last year, while donations to the food bank have fallen by 23 percent.

"We're bracing ourselves for a difficult season," said Amy Pessia, the food bank's executive director.

"Folks that typically donated to us in the past are probably not going to donate as much or at all because they're experiencing budgetary constraints in their own home."

The food bank predicts distributing about 2.5 million pounds of food this year, 300,000 more pounds than last year.

"It's working families -- a lot of folks don't even imagine -- who are in need of food assistance," Pessia said.

The food bank is planning a food drive in March to fill the gap between Christmas food drives and the U.S. Post Office drive in May.

The Greater Boston Food Bank serves 321,000 people annually; 83,000 weekly. Each year the food bank distributes more than 25 million pounds of food, such as protein, dairy, fruits, and vegetables to 600 program sites across the state.

Spokeswoman Stephanie Nichols said the organization receives 44 percent of donated food from over 500 donors including community food drives and local retailers and manufacturers. Forty-two percent comes from the state and 14 percent from federal food aid.

Hunger advocates say the problem has grown to include many families beset by the threat of foreclosures, and an increase in energy and food costs.

According to the Warren Group, publisher of Banker & Tradesman, Massachusetts' foreclosures have tripled compared to last year. Foreclosure deeds in the month of October jumped 119.5 percent, from 333 last year to 731 this year. Through October of this year, there were 6,324 foreclosure deeds in the state, compared to 2,112 at the end of October 2006. There were just 2,634 foreclosure deeds in the state for all of 2006.

Household budgets are also hurt rising energy costs. According to the state's Division of Energy Resources, heating oil is 30 percent more than last year. Oil was \$2.38 a gallon last winter. Now it's up to \$3.03 a gallon. The price of propane is up \$2.77 a gallon, 25 percent more than last year.

Food prices are also up. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, national food prices have increased by 4.5 percent. Milk prices are up by 20 percent; eggs are up by 44 percent.

The Center for Social Policy at UMass-Boston reports that nearly 900,000 Massachusetts residents live in what it calls a hardship gap. The October 2007 report, "Bridging the Gaps Between Earnings and Basic Needs in Massachusetts", said one out of every four families don't earn enough to cover basic costs of living, as measured by the Crittenton's Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standards (FESS).

The Crittenton measures how much income is needed to meet the basic requirements for various family types across the commonwealth. According to the survey, the state average budget for a single parent household with two small children is between \$48,000 and \$58,000.

In Wilmington, five new families signed up for assistance at the Wilmington Food Commissary Wednesday night.

Founder Bob DiPalma said a lot of working families and single adults depend on the pantry.

"They don't make enough to make it happen," DiPalma said. "We get people over the rough spot."

Hunger advocates also worry about cuts in both state and federal funding. The Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) has been level funded at \$12 million for seven years. The amount will decrease to \$11 million this year. Advocates the cuts are the equivalent of 800,000 meals.