

Hard times have food pantries scrambling

By **Doug Moore**

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September 23, 2008---David Hardge, of St. Louis, loads a pallet of food into a Foodbank truck to be delivered to one of 300 agencies Foodbank services in rural Missouri or Illinois.

(Emily Rasinski/P-D)

ST. LOUIS — When the grocery center opens at Food Outreach four days each week, the line snakes out the door.

The demand for food at the midtown nonprofit center is greater than at any time in Greg Lukeman's seven years as executive director.

"When you see the number of people coming in, it's staggering," Lukeman said. In July, a typically slow month, Food Outreach provided 35,000 meals, a 39 percent increase from a year before.

Higher gas and food prices combined with more people out of work is putting a strain on food pantries, soup kitchens and meal delivery services throughout the region and across the country.

These agencies, created to help the poor, are seeing more first-timers walk through their doors each week.

The new clients never needed a helping hand before. But with food and gas prices rising at rates much faster than cost-of-living increases, more and more families have no other choice. For some working families, a medical emergency or car repair is the tipping point that pushes them from independence to cries for help.

"These are really hard times," said Enid Borden, president and CEO of Meals on Wheels Association of America in Alexandria, Va. "I've been here 16 years and never seen it this bad. Any way you slice it, it's just a mess."

A year ago, the average price for a gallon of gas was \$2.67. Today, it's \$3.69. Food prices rose during the last year at a rate not seen in nearly two decades. And unemployment is at a five-year high.

Food banks serve as the distribution centers for pantries and soup kitchens, the often small storefront spots in neighborhoods where families can come for free food.

At the St. Louis Area Foodbank, which provides food to 500 agencies in 14 counties in Missouri and 12 counties in Illinois, increased demand and costs have combined for a wallop.

The food bank is not at the point where it has to turn away any of its food pantries or soup kitchens, but a 15 percent jump in requests for food during the last year is making it more challenging, said Matt Dace, associate director of St. Louis Area Foodbank.

"Of that 15 percent, 70 percent are first-time food pantry users," Dace said.

"We're seeing a whole new crop of pantry users. The working poor is growing."

The same holds true nationwide. A survey of 180 food banks in late April and early May by Feeding America found that 99 percent have seen an increase in the number of clients served within the last year.

For the first four months of this year, St. Louis Area Foodbank spent \$120,000 to haul 4.4 million pounds of food here from other parts of the country, compared with \$60,000 to transport

4 million pounds of food during the same time last year.

"We spent 100 percent more for 10 percent more food," Dace said. Although food is often donated, the food bank has to pay to pick it up.

"Kellogg's is a donor. They might agree to give us a truckload of Corn Flakes. They produce them in Battle Creek, Mich. How they get from there to St. Louis is on us," Dace said.

For a truck to make that trip, it can cost \$900 to \$1,100, depending on gas prices, he said.

Food Outreach is the largest nonprofit agency in the St. Louis area to provide food to people with cancer and HIV/AIDS. In addition to supplying groceries, the agency also provides ready-made frozen meals. It serves about 1,500 people a year. Some are regulars. Others may request service once or twice a year.

The increased demand has become a two-pronged challenge. The agency has to buy more food — prices are up 7 percent this year — and pay more to have it brought in from the distributors, who have tripled fuel surcharges this year. In addition, those who used to come in for food are now asking for home delivery because they can no longer afford to drive, Lukeman said.

"That's more cost on us. More labor, more time, more gas," Lukeman said. On top of all that, event sponsorships are coming in at lower levels because of the economy, he said. So far this year, the agency has spent \$45,000 more on food than it budgeted for.

To meet the demand, Food Outreach is preparing more foods in its kitchen, which is cheaper than buying in a grocery.

At the same time, Food Outreach also is calling on more groups — corporations, schools, church groups, restaurants — to hold food drives.

In Elsberry, two or three new families a week stop by the Lincoln County Cupboard.

"We see more middle-class people than we've ever seen," said Doug Mesker, one of the operators of the cupboard. "We're getting people that are saying: 'God, I'm embarrassed to come and ask for this, but I really need this.'"

At the Society of St. Vincent de Paul food pantry in East St. Louis, requests for meals have jumped from 175 a day this time last year to 250 today.

"When the economy is down, it hurts everybody," said Pat Hoglebe, development director of St. Vincent de Paul.

Some help, however, is coming. The farm bill, which was signed into law in May and goes into effect next month, includes \$250 million a year for the Emergency Food Assistance Program, an increase from \$140 million annually.

Also this year, Sam's Clubs and Wal-Mart stores expanded a pilot program nationwide to provide bakery and deli products to food banks. The donations are expected to eventually add 70 million pounds of food per year to the food bank system.

Whether these efforts are enough to meet the increasing demand is unknown.

"When gas and food prices go up, the dollar shrinks," Hoglebe said. "The need is growing. It's not getting better."

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Note from St. Louis Area Foodbank:

All local agencies referenced in the article are members of the St. Louis Area Foodbank. As of the date of the article, each had received the following from the Foodbank in 2008:

Food Outreach: 18,235 pounds
Lincoln County Cupboard: 87,498 pounds
St. Vincent de Paul: 7,232 pounds

Please visit www.stlfoodbank.org for more.