

Published: Apr 06, 2010 08:30 PM
Modified: Apr 06, 2010 09:19 PM

Food pantries stretched by the newly unemployed

BY SADIA LATIFI, Staff Writer

APEX - A Tuesday morning at the Western Wake Crisis Center's food pantry is a picture of organized chaos.

A small army of volunteers weighs, sorts and packs boxes and cans of food into large, brown paper bags while a crowd grows in the small waiting room. The group of men and women fill out required forms while babies fuss, anticipating the arrival of their monthly food supply.

The center is located in the core of downtown Apex, on East Chatham Street near historic Salem Street, among chic cafes and independent shops. Outside, the 1,300 square-foot corner office space is quiet. There aren't many pedestrians milling about on the sidewalk, and the center's windows are covered with white blinds.

You could walk past the Western Wake Crisis Center without noticing it, but the reality remains: there are hungry people inside and throughout food pantries across the Triangle. Continued job loss in the last two years has just meant more grumbling stomachs.

The growing demand has made it difficult for food banks to keep their pantries sufficiently stocked.

"We're just trying to keep up," said Peter Werbicki, president and CEO of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. "We have not seen any of that ease up at all at this point. ... It's been very difficult to keep up with it all."



Mark Wilson and Mary Dyksterhouse pack bags with canned goods and other essentials at the Western Wake Crisis Ministry in downtown Apex on Tuesday, March 30, 2010.

Ray Black III for The Cary News

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The food bank saw its requests for food rise last year by 30 to 60 percent in the 34 counties it serves. The region's needs mirror national and statewide trends. More than one in seven American households struggled to put enough food on the table in 2008, the highest rate since tracking began in 1995, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report. That's about 49 million people in the country.

The need is leading more and more families to seek governmental assistance.

The number of households in the state that rely on food stamps has increased 45 percent over the last two years. In February, 1.31 million people - more than one in seven North Carolinians - benefited from the assistance.

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"We're seeing heads of households and people who have mortgages. It's a new poor," said Jill Staton Bullard, chief executive officer and co-founder of Raleigh's Inter-Faith Food Shuttle. "The new face of hunger is really an important thing to understand."

In February, a decade-high 129,589 people in Wake, Durham, Orange and Johnston county benefited from food assistance, according to the latest data compiled by the Jordan Institute for Families at UNC-Chapel Hill. That's up 19.7 percent from the same month last year - the biggest year-over-year jump since 2002.

In Wake County, 65,283 people received food services in February, up 20.4 percent from February 2009.

Food banks are also seeking aid, receiving thousands of pounds of food each month through the federal government's emergency food assistance program. Food donations at the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina were up 12 percent last year. But Werbicki said most is from the federal stimulus package - a source of sustenance that won't last forever.

At Fuquay-Varina Emergency Food Pantry, 40 to 45 percent of the donations, or 15,000 pounds of food a month, come from government aid, volunteer Cynthia Ellison said. New families register each day the pantry is open. The pantry serves anywhere from 500 to 700 households a month.

But even with government support, Fuquay-Varina is still receiving its share of donations. "We had an anonymous donor mail us a letter with five \$100 bills and five Bible verses," Ellison said. "We are so fortunate."

Donations across the region have been varied:

Raleigh's Inter-Faith Food Shuttle feeds about 400 more people per day than it did two years ago. The organization sends about 11 trucks full of meals per day to high-poverty

neighborhoods throughout the county. "We've seen the lines double in many areas," Bullard said.

She said monetary donations have remained steady, and food donations have increased in the last year. But the trucks still can't feed everyone who comes in for food. "The recession hit the lowest income level two to three years ago," Bullard said. "Since then we've seen a steady rise. The need is still greater than we're able to meet."

Community Helpers, a food distribution center in Knightdale, usually doesn't have a great deal of money or food for its operation, according to director Billy Neal. Food comes from the regional food bank on a weekly basis. When the center runs low on funding, Neal and his family pay for items out of pocket. "We keep doing it because we want to do something. We want to give back and help with this problem," he said.

In Hillsborough, Orange Congregations in Mission's overall donations are down from this time last year, according to Kay Stagner, manager of client services. But donations are still coming in. In 2009, the group raised \$45,216 after the Stewards Fund challenged the non-profit to raise \$10,000 before receiving matching funds. "So many people were being laid-off, those who still had jobs seemed to feel obligated to help those who had lost their jobs," she said.

Attendance at Shiloh Christian Church's soup kitchen in Johnston County has increased 30 percent to about 50 people per day. Most weekdays, a line of people wrap around the church's buildings. "Whole families are losing jobs and people are cutting back," chef Gwen Williams said.

The kitchen uses supplies from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, the USDA, Food Lion and smaller donors. With more diners, Williams has had to adjust menus and juggle hodgepodge donations of beef, chicken, pork and vegetables.

The kitchen goes through up to 1,600 pounds of food in a month. "You just have to change how you feed," Williams said. "It just runs out quicker when you're feeding that many more people."

Volunteers at the Western Wake center in Apex said they have seen an increase in foot traffic, registering new clients almost every day the food pantry is open. The donation supply, on the other hand, goes through its usual ebb and flow: heavy donations in the winter, a major drop in the spring and summer.

"People don't always realize it but hunger is a year-round problem," said Rebecca Spell, the center's director.

In April 2009, the center collected more than 14,000 pounds of food, including government-funded donations. In November, it collected more than 35,000 pounds.

The center receives so many more donations in the winter that it needs extra storage space.

It rations out the surplus for slow spring and summer months.

Spell and Werbicki said more laid off workers are coming in for food, but the crucial need remains: children at home without government-subsidized meals in the summer and seniors on fixed-income.

People in the community are still donating, Spell said.

One volunteer at the center, Claire Bambara, said a young boy had come in earlier to

drop off plastic bags he had been saving.

"Everyone is really doing what they can," she said.

Staff writers Jack Hagel, Andrew Kenney, Ray Martin, Aaron Moody and Daniel Pate contributed to this report.

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