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Hunger has many faces
Food closets try to keep pace with demand

BY SADIA LATIFI, Staff Writer

SMITHFIELD - Across the state, more people are depending on food banks, soup kitchens and charities to sate their hunger. In Smithfield, attendance at Shiloh Christian Church's free lunch has increased 30 percent to about 50 people per day, according to staff.

Most weekdays, a line of people wraps around the church's buildings. Some attendees have jobs and want to save a few dollars, and some have few other options.

"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.

In all, the kitchen goes through up to 1,600 pounds of food in a month, Williams said.

"You just have to change how you feed," she said. "It just runs out quicker when you're feeding that many more people."

The new face of hunger

The growing demand for food has made it hard for food banks to keep pantries and charities like Shiloh Christian Church sufficiently stocked.

"We're just trying to keep up," said Peter Werbicki, president



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Feed the Need 2010

What is it? The News & Observer's annual community service project to increase awareness about hunger in our region and support the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina

How can I help? Donate nonperishable foods at area Harris Teeter stores during the food drive, April 1-17. Watch the N&O or The Herald for Feed the Need ads and send a donation with the coupon in the ad. Go to feedtheneednc.com to donate online or volunteer to help on Feed the Need Day.

What is Feed the Need Day? On Saturday, April 17, volunteers will sell a special edition of The N&O at select Harris Teeter and Bojangles locations in the Triangle, with proceeds going to the food bank. Please look for them and buy a paper, or make a donation.

How much has Feed the Need helped? In three years, Feed the Need has produced almost 40,000 pounds of food and more than \$168,000 in cash for the Food Bank.

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and chief executive 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."

The food bank saw its requests for food rise last year by 30 to 60 percent in the 34 counties it serves, and 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.

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

Tightening finances are leading more and more families to seek public 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.

In February, a decade-high 129,589 people in Wake, Durham, Orange and Johnston county benefitted 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 Johnston County, 22,550 people received food services in February, up 17.8 percent from February 2009.

Sources of sustenance

Food donations at the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina were up 12

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percent last year, but Werbicki said most of that was from the federal stimulus package - a source of sustenance that won't be around forever.

At the Fuquay-Varina Emergency Food Pantry, about 40 to 45 percent of donations, or 15,000 pounds of food a month, comes from government aid, according to longtime volunteer Cynthia Ellison.

New families register each day the pantry is open. The pantry serves anywhere from 500 to 700 households a month.

Some help comes in unexpected forms too.

"We had an anonymous donor mail us a letter with five \$100 bills and five Bible verses," Ellison said. "We are so fortunate for our community support."

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," he said. "We want to give back and help with this problem."

In Hillsborough, overall donations to Orange Congregations in Mission 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 nonprofit 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," Stagner said.

Ebb and flow

Volunteers at the Western Wake Crisis Center's food pantry 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.

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.

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

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

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