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Even the food banks are going hungry

More people turn to charities that have little left to give

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RALEIGH - By Wednesday morning, about the only thing in the house left for Kristie Hammonds to eat was her pride.

So she choked that down and had a social worker friend drive her to Catholic Parish Outreach, where she got a week's worth of groceries for herself and her two sons, ages 4 and two weeks.

Across the Triangle, those who distribute food to the needy say they have seen a spike in demand, including a rush of clients in the past month who, like Hammonds, have never had to ask for help or have done so only rarely. The agencies attribute the increase to rising food and gas prices, both of which are pinching the food pantries, making it difficult for them to stock enough groceries.

"We're having trouble keeping up with demand," said Terry Foley, director of Catholic Parish Outreach.

A year ago, Foley said, the organization was struggling to store its food at its facility off Raleigh Boulevard. Now, many of the shelves are empty. Where volunteers used to toss three bags of powdered milk into each box of groceries for a family of three, she said, they now drop in one.

In March, Foley said, the agency doled out food to serve 5,311 people, 33 percent more than the same month last year. With April not quite over, she said, it had distributed food to 5,577 people for the month.

"No one wants to come here. Everyone would rather go to the grocery store," Foley said. "We're having a lot of people coming in who say they never thought they would have to come to a food pantry."

Nearly every grocery category measured by the U.S. Labor Department, which monitors inflation, has increased in the past year, most from 10 to 20 percent. The price of eggs has jumped 25 percent. Some clients report they have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced.

With gas at record highs, some families are having to cut back on food to pay for fuel. Others are putting possessions up for sale on Internet auction sites.

"If you're just barely making ends meet to start with, and you have to pay an extra \$2 a gallon for gas, that's a whole lot of your income," said Thomas Moore, who pastors the Church of God of Prophecy in West Raleigh and oversees its small food pantry.

In the past, the church has made deliveries to those who couldn't get to the pantry: shut-ins, the elderly, people without cars. But Moore said he's had to cut that out.

These pantries and dozens of others get some food they distribute from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina in Raleigh. Christy Simmons, spokeswoman for the agency, said that in the 34 counties it serves, nearly 450,000 people are at risk of not getting adequate food every day, including 149,000 children.

The food bank also has felt the pain of higher gas prices, Simmons said; more than 40 percent of the food it sells at reduced cost to agencies that distribute it to the poor is sent out in a fleet of 21 trucks. In the past year, the diesel they run on has gone from \$2.68 to \$4.20 per gallon.

Jacquelyn Clymore, executive director of the Alliance of AIDS Services Carolina, said many clients are living on



A lone egg waits to be packed at the Catholic Parish Outreach food pantry in Raleigh. Rising food and fuel costs are pinching food pantries just as hard as consumers.

Staff Photos by Shawn Rocco

\$560 to \$580 a month in disability income. The Alliance tries to help by letting them shop its food pantry once a week, getting 25 items, Clymore said. But she doesn't have money to buy more food for new requests, or to pay the higher prices she is charged.

"We are running out," Clymore said. "Sometimes we don't have even 25 items to give away."

Kristie Hammonds hopes that by next month, she'll be in better shape financially. She has a job interview today.

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