



Food bank official says hunger is on the rise

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Rough economic times are leading to more hungry families in the east needing help from local food banks.

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina's Greenville branch held an open house Monday to highlight the National Hunger Action Month of September at a time when the high price of gas and a mortgage crisis is leading to hard times for families on the verge of poverty.

Larry Motteler, operations manager at the Greenville branch of the food bank, said that hunger is on the rise in eastern North Carolina.

"With unemployment the way it is and continuing to go up, hunger is on the rise," he said. "The last statistics that we have is 430,000 people in the 11 counties that we serve are in need or at risk of hunger. It is all because of layoffs and the economy the way it is."

The food bank serves 11 counties by providing food to various nonprofit agencies that distribute food to those in need.

The Greenville branch serves, in part or in whole, agencies in Carteret, Craven, Greene, Jones, Lenior, Onslow, Pamlico, Pitt, Edgecombe, Wilson and Duplin counties.

Motteler said that a down economy leads to hard times for the hungry and for the agencies that serve them.

"Food is on the scarce side, it is harder to get food to everyone who needs it," Motteler said.

He said food is more limited than it has ever been, due not only to the slow economy but also to last year's drought and this year's dry conditions.

Cliff Harvell, of the Greene County Interfaith Food Pantry, one of the agencies served by the Greenville food bank, said his group is serving more families than usual this time of the year.

The Greene County pantry is serving around 140 families. Typically in September, he said, it serves around 90 families. The number could go as high as 160 families by Christmas, Harvell said.

"The food bank is tightening up. Everybody is sharpening their pencils," Harvell said. "We don't want to cut back our food bank, because people need us now more than ever."

Harvell said most of the people who seek help from his ministry are on fixed incomes, but he is beginning to see people who have been hit by the mortgage crisis and people who cannot afford to keep gas in their cars.

"We are seeing people that you would not expect to see," said Becky Stas, who serves on the food bank advisory board. "People who would normally be able to make it, are not able to make it right now."

A lot of the food distributed from the Greenville branch goes to agencies helping people who need to offset the cost of their bills, Stas said.

As energy and food prices rise, families are having to choose between paying the bills and putting food on the table, she said.

"Outside of a natural disaster, I have not seen more of a demand for our services," said Peter Werbicki, president and CEO of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

"We are not capturing all of those that are hovering above the poverty line. They are really feeling the crunch right now."

Stas said that the purchasing power of the food bank allows them to purchase \$8 in food for every dollar they collect.

So a dollar goes a long way toward helping the families who are struggling in the area right now, Stas said.

The Greenville branch distributes around 6 million pounds of food every year.

To donate contact the Greenville branch at (252) 752-4996.

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