

Masthead

Published Fri, Nov 13, 2009 04:57 AM

Modified Fri, Nov 13, 2009 08:14 AM

Generosity races against hunger

More people are poor and hungry this year because of the recession, and even though area charities say they are seeing a more generous spirit, donations are unlikely to keep up with demand.

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina has seen requests for food rise by 30 percent to 60 percent in the 34 counties it serves, said Peter Werbicki, president and CEO of the food bank.

Demand is being driven by the loss of jobs. Only two of the counties the food bank serves had unemployment rates in the double digits in July 2008, Werbicki said. A year later, 23 counties had double-digit unemployment. And last week, the federal government put the national unemployment rate at 10.2 percent, the highest level in 26 years.

"What's happened in the last year or two, the face of hunger has changed," Werbicki said. "It could be your next-door neighbor, a work colleague."

Area residents have jumped to help this year. Matt Archer organized a food drive at his Raleigh business, Archer Investment Management. Clients are encouraged to bring nonperishable food when they come in for financial reviews. Archer also has been asking his business contacts to donate. The goal is to fill his office with food.

"I'm a lucky guy, I own my own business. I want to give back to my community," he said. "Things have been difficult for a lot of people."

Donations to the food bank began to pick up this summer, Werbicki said, which is generally one of the slowest times for food drives. The food bank collected triple the amount of donations it usually does in summer. The agency collected 37.5 million pounds of food in its most recent fiscal year, an increase of 16 percent from the year before. This year, the agency is 2 million pounds ahead, in part because the federal stimulus package provided food.

Visitors to the N.C. State Fair in October donated a record 237,000 pounds of food during the annual Food Lion-sponsored can drive.

Retailers and civic groups also are ramping up their food-collection efforts, and many grocery stores have boxes ready to take donations.

Even Santa has gotten in on the efforts. Those who donate canned goods while visiting Santa at Triangle Town Center and Cary Towne Center malls can receive a discount on photo packages.

Pain builds, one by one

Still, plenty of people are hurting.

Heather Bryant, 33, was a case manager at an urban women's center in New Jersey when she got laid off.

Bryant moved back to North Carolina, but she hasn't been able to find a job in her field. She is working 25 to 30 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant, but she doesn't make quite enough money to cover bills.

She's had to explain to her 11-year-old daughter, Marlena, that there isn't any money.

"Once upon a time we were stable, but because of the way everything has fallen because of me losing my job and having to make such a big move, everything has fallen on her and it's not fair to her," Bryant said. "Everybody's been hit with this recession. Everybody is affected."

At Raleigh's Helping Hand Mission, which provided Thanksgiving turkeys to nearly 500 people last year, as many as 900 people have already signed up to receive help this year.

"A lot of people say this is their first time ever coming," Helping Hand volunteer Willie Thorpe said. "The economy is just so bad right now, and so many people have lost jobs."

Many needs at holidays

November and December traditionally are crucial months for food-drive donations, Werbicki said. About 50 percent of the food bank's food-drive donations arrive during the final two months of the year.

Hunger is a problem year-round, said Jason Boone, spokesman for the Inter-faith Food Shuttle. But it presents an extra difficulty for families during the holidays, when big gatherings and meals are the norm.

People who are hurting financially "still want to have a nice holiday," Boone said. "It's really important to make that happen."

Bryant said her daughter has wanted a Nintendo Wii for three years. She won't get one this year.

"I know it's disheartening to her, but she's like, 'It's OK, mommy,' " said Bryant, who volunteers at the Helping Hand Mission when she is not working. "She can tell when I want to break down, and she's very encouraging."

Werbicki said Triangle residents will respond. "This is a terrific community for giving back."

Thorpe agreed. "The community has always been great for us, and they always come out."

Staff writer Thad Ogburn contributed to this report.

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