

Hunger for food, tough times bad mix for local food pantries

By Gerald Dzuiba | Daily Herald Columnist

Published: 8/8/2008 12:05 AM

Marilyn Mack doesn't need anybody to tell her how bad the economy is. All she has to do is look at the line of people waiting at her door when she arrives at work.

In past months, lines of people needing free food have been longer not only for Mack and other volunteers at the FISH Food Pantry in Carpentersville, but for volunteers at pantries through the Fox Valley from Aurora to Algonquin and beyond.

"There's been five to 10 people standing at the door when we show up," she said. "These are people who have had to spend their money for other things, such as gas, rent and clothes for their kids. They don't have anything left for food."

And as far as the lines of people donating food and money needed to run the pantries, they aren't as long, she said. The idea of supply and demand is out the window. Volunteers give what they can and improvise, such as giving out ground turkey because it's cheaper than ground beef.

"There's people standing in line for food who were once donors here," Mack said. "We serve all of Dundee Township. We've even have a few residents from (affluent) Sleepy Hollow asking for food."

"Our cupboards aren't bare, but they look pretty sad. But we have never turned anybody away. Everyone gets something."

In June of 2007, 327 families asked for free food at Mack's pantry. This year during the same month, 50 more families needed something to put on their dinner tables

Shelves at the Algonquin-Lake in the Hills Food Pantry aren't as dismal, but they don't hold the food long with its increasing demand, said volunteer Linda Knight.

"We're seeing a fair amount of new families coming to us," she said. "We had 600 families come to us in June. We're doing OK, but you have to remember demand is always up in summer."

The reason: kids are off from school. They eat all their meals seven days a week at home. During the school year, low-income families take advantage of government-subsidized breakfast and lunch programs.

Summer also brings a decrease in money and food donations to the pantries. Monthly drives held by public and private schools stop from June to August. They start again when students return to the classrooms.

But this summer is different, said H. Dennis Smith, executive director of the Northern Illinois Food Bank.

The economy is intensifying the highs and lows of supply and demand for pantries.

"You have three elements in play here," he said. "You have changes in the economy with the high fuel prices. That includes the high unemployment rate. You also have the traditional decrease in summer donorship. And thirdly, you have a decrease in the amount of food pantries receive from the government."

The food bank sells and supplies some perishable food, such as cheese and eggs, to pantries in 13 counties that surround Cook County. All of them are having the same troubles this year, Smith said.

"People who have donated food or money in the past no longer can afford to do it," he said. "Some of them even need the food themselves."

The high unemployment rate is the reason the pantry at Centro de Informacion in Elgin has twice as many people needing free food this year, said Cathy Korak, the agency's director of finances.

"These are people who work in the landscaping and the construction business who can't find jobs. Last year, we served an average of 45 families a month. Now, we're up to 80 a month," she said.

"They receive the food and walk by my office to leave. All day I see a steady stream of shopping carts with bags of food in them," Korak said. "For them we're their last resort. People don't like going to a food pantry, but what are you going to do when all your money went for gas and rent?"

That's the case at the Grafton Township Food Pantry.

"It's not just seasonal here. We're giving food to people who don't have jobs any more," said Mary Hardy, the pantry's manager. "We're seeing a steady increase in people coming to us. It's gone up 20 more people a month."

The Batavia Interfaith Food Pantry at the Batavia Public Library and the St. Peter Catholic Church food pantry at the church in Geneva receive donations of food and cash directly, while also contracting with the Northern Illinois Food Bank in order to keep the shelves stocked. Workers say supplies are sufficient for now.

"A church just had a food drive for us, so we really have a lot of food on hand right now," said Stan Johnston of Batavia, chair of the Batavia food pantry. "It's a nice problem to have. When we need food we go to the Northern Illinois Food Bank."

Johnston said his pantry is probably seeing six or seven new families a month, but the numbers remain steady as others drop off. According to Johnston, the pantry served 242 families in July, roughly 1,000 individuals. These numbers are in line with normal averages of 200 to 250 families a month. The Batavia food pantry is mainly supported by church, scout and school groups.

Bob Smith of Geneva, who directs the St. Peter ministry, says his food pantry is also serving more families.

"We have probably seen a 10 percent increase over the last three months," Smith said. "We're serving 185 to 190 families twice a month (food is distributed on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month). According to the church Web site, this number is up from last year's statistic of 165 families a month."

But don't curse the season and the economy completely. This time of year also brings out the blessings and generosity of gardeners who share their harvests with some pantries.

FISH Food Pantry volunteers in Carpentersville are counting on those private donations to fill their shelves with fresh tomatoes, squash and other vegetables, Mack said.

"They have really helped up in the past," she said. "They make what we have go farther."

- Staff writer Nancy Gier contributed to this article.