

Food pantries, service agencies facing double whammy

ARCHDIOCESE — While economic indicators continue to tumble, the number of people turning to parish food pantries continues to climb. In many cases, pantries are struggling to meet the increased demand. Working people are getting food from charity to make their paychecks stretch to the end of the month, and food kitchens are seeing people at their doors who have never before needed help.

"The biggest impact we've seen is a tremendous increase in the number of calls from people needing assistance," said Liz Carter, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVDP) in Cincinnati.

She cited several recent phone calls to the organization's charitable pharmacy, which opened in 2006, from people who have been laid off for the first time and have lost their health insurance. "These are people who have always worked, always gotten by," she said. "They're from good, solid, blue-collar neighborhoods and are the ones that are really feeling the tough economic times the most."

"The time of year just compounds it," she added. "We've been getting more calls from people who have never had to ask for help before, and some of them are embarrassed as a result. It's hard for them to make the call, because they want to hold on to what they've worked so hard for and maintain some sense of normalcy. They want to have Thanksgiving at home, not take the kids to a soup kitchen."

A new report from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that in 2007 13 million households experienced "food insecurity," meaning their access to adequate food was limited by a lack of money and other resources. That was 11.1 percent of all U.S. households.

About one-third of food-insecure households (4.7 million, or 4.1 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security, that is, the food intake of some household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns disrupted during 2007.

Locally St. Vincent de Paul's conferences operated at the parish level have also seen an increase in requests for assistance, Carter said. The food pantry at St. Agnes Parish in Bond Hill, for instance, served 150 families on a recent Saturday, up from 45 at the same time last year.



"All of our conferences do something with food distribution," Carter explained. "We have seven or eight who operate traditional food pantries. Others will respond to phone calls and take boxes of food to those in need. They've been doing this all along, but are just overwhelmed with the number of calls they're getting now."

With the holidays approaching, Carter said SVDP is in need of toys, food and money; a gift of \$25 is enough to provide a holiday dinner package for a family of four. In addition, SVDP needs assistance in order to meet the increased requests for the ongoing services they provide, including help with utilities and rent. "The majority of the calls we get are from people in these situations," Carter said. "If they don't get help, they'll be sleeping in their cars, on a friend's couch or out on the street. Food is always welcome, and one thing we never have enough of is mattresses. We see so many people who are sleeping on the floor."

Carter urged people to open their hearts during these difficult times and look to their faith to determine how to respond. "It just goes back to our basic Gospel call to take care of one another," she said. "In these tough times, many people will be impacted by the economy, but there are some that are doing better than others. It will really come down to them reaching out to others. That's what it's going to take."

In Dayton, General Motors will close its truck assembly plant in Moraine two days before Christmas and leave more than 1,000 people unemployed.

"In terms of need, we're really seeing increased levels," said Andrea Skrlac, Director of Communications for St. Vincent de Paul in Dayton. "They're not able to make ends meet the way they have in the past."

The St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Dayton is doing a strong business as customers who may have shopped at other stores in the past are seeking bargains on such things as clothing, household items and even Christmas decorations. The store also acts as a resource for other agencies that need specific items.

"This one of the few options that really is working for some people at this time," Skrlac said. "Folks are looking to stretch what they do have."

In addition to job loss, higher expenses are also squeezing people, Skrlac said.

Business at the store is increasing, but donations are dropping.

"Folks who may have donated in the past are now coming in as customers," Skrlac said. "People don't realize how close many people are to crossing that line of being able to give help and then needing help."

At the organization's food pantry, the story is the same.

"The economy has tightened up on food donations as well," Skrlac said. "There's not as much coming in as we would like to see. People do continue to be very generous to the best of their ability. It's just that their ability is not as great as it has been in the past."

Smaller, neighborhood-based charitable organizations are also feeling the economic crunch, including St. Michael Food Pantry in Lower Price Hill.

"We're really seeing our numbers increase," said Linda Esterman, outreach worker. "Requests at the food pantry have increased by a third in the last four months. Our soup kitchen, which operates one week a month, served 1,000 recently. We've been flooded with calls from people looking for help with utilities, food, clothing and baby items."

"We're getting a lot more calls from people who are working but still can't make ends meet," she added. "You can tell if a person isn't used to asking for help or isn't used to the system. They don't know what to bring for proof of their situation, what resources are available, the basic process. It's hard for them."

"The situation is dire," at St. Michael, Esterman said. "Our shelves are completely bare. With the increased demand and donations being down, we just couldn't make ends meet this year. Our shelves are usually full for the holidays."

"We've been in the business since 1914. We've weathered a lot of storms in that time," said Kathleen Donnellan, executive director of Catholic Charities of South Western Ohio. "We know that while cutbacks maybe necessary, we want to help as long as possible and keep continuing to serve those in need."

Catholic Charities oversees 25 various senior programs and outreach services as well as food banks. The agency serves Hamilton, Butler, Clark, Champaign and Logan counties.

Donnellan said seniors and families have sought help mostly to pay utilities and receive emergency food to put on the table.

How to help

Society of St. Vincent de Paul: Donations can be made in person or by check at 1133 S. Edwin C. Moses Blvd., Suite 300, Dayton, OH 45408, or can be made online at www.StVincentDayton.org. For more information, call 937 222-7349.

Catholic Charities of South Western Ohio: (513) 241-7745.

Mercy Franciscan at St. Raphael: (513) 603-8200.

Society of St. Vincent de Paul: Donations can be made in person or by check at 1125 Bank St., Cincinnati, Ohio 45214, or can be made online at www.SVDPcincinnati.org. For more information, call 513-562-8841, ext. 225.

St. Michael's Center, c/o Lower Price Hill Community School, 2104 St. Michael Street, Cincinnati, Ohio 45204.

"We have seen a number of people requesting food assistance and a decrease in donations," she said. "Most people who come to the pantry work full time but aren't making enough to make ends meet. We've seen an increase of seniors requesting food assistance."

Donnellan said her staff sends a letter to current donors informing them of the importance of their ongoing contribution. In addition, the agency receives funding from United Way in Cincinnati, Oxford, Butler, Clark, Champaign and Logan counties.

"The United Way of Greater Cincinnati puts forth a phenomenal effort. For this year we'll receive a slight decrease in funding, but not significant," she said.

Tony Stieritz, director of the archdiocesan Catholic Social Action Office questioned, "Where do the poorest of the poor go in these times?"

"There were already 37 million people living at or below poverty and certainly there will be even more," Stieritz said. "We can't be more for ourselves."

He cited a Nov. 11 a statement entitled, "Solidarity at a Time of Economic Crisis," from U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It states, "We are all children of God. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are all in this together. Hard times can isolate us or they can bring us together. The Catholic community will continue to reach out to those in need, stand with those who are hurt, and work for policies that bring greater compassion, accountability and justice to economic life."

In Hamilton, Carrie Morris is the executive director of Mercy Franciscan at St. Raphael. The agency provides utility and one-time emergency assistance as well as emergency food.

She said their food pantry shelves are bare and they need coats, sweaters and gifts for teenagers at the agency's Santa Shop. The Santa Shop is for families in need of Christmas gifts at the last minute for their children.

Like many food pantries, their annual food drives have been cut to a fraction, she said.

"We usually have 12 to 15 food drives in the community. We have four food drives in the community now," she said.

Donnellan said she and her staff have dealt with gradual increases in the need for services since the beginning of the year. Being in the midst of the holiday season, those year-end gifts once received from people given a Christmas bonus or earnings from the stock market won't be counted on this year.

"We just emphasize to get the message out to those who do have a job, remember those who lost their jobs," Donnellan said. "We have to be hopeful. Hope places the situation in God's hands. We're about doing God's work and fulfilling the Gospel to help our neighbors."

Carmen M. Hubbard, David Eck, Sister Eileen Connelly and Catholic News Service contributed to this report.