

Tuesday November 23, 2010

## Demand for food assistance rising this holiday season

### Virginia faring better than most of the country, USDA says

by Kali Schumitz | Staff Writer

Despite signs of a slow economic recovery, Fairfax County agencies are continuing to see increases in requests for food assistance.

Virginia as a whole is better off than the rest of the country in terms of food security, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report released last week.

About 9 percent of Virginians were "food insecure" during 2009, according to the USDA, meaning there were times during the year that those individuals were unable to get enough food to feed their families. Nationwide, about 15 percent of Americans were food insecure in 2009, the USDA survey found.

Fairfax County is continuing to see increases in the number of residents who qualify for benefits under the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, according to Belinda Buescher, a spokeswoman for the Fairfax County Department of Family Services. The increased number of people benefitting from SNAP has helped stave off food insecurity, according to the USDA report.

From July 2008 through June 2009, an average of 13,769 Fairfax County residents received SNAP benefits each month, Buescher said. Now, there are 20,662 residents enrolled in the program and the county continues to process in excess of 1,500 new applications per month.

Although the federal government pays for the benefits, Fairfax County staff handles the increased caseloads and applications, Buescher added.

It is the same story at local nonprofits that provide emergency food assistance. There has been a big surge in requests this year for the holiday food baskets that allow low-income families to have a special meal at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The Fairfax-based nonprofit Our Daily Bread, which processes such requests that come through Fairfax County, has received about 1,400 more referrals for Thanksgiving baskets this year compared to 2009. About 3,300 people requested Thanksgiving baskets this year, according to Lisa Whetzel, executive director of Our Daily Bread.

"I think the perception of most people is that they think that it's really low income folks who are hurting now, but it's really everybody," Whetzel said.

Melissa Jansen, executive director of Western Fairfax Christian Ministries in Chantilly, said that nonprofit also has seen about a 15 percent increase in Thanksgiving requests this year. She has seen the need for food and other emergency assistance go up every year during her three years with the nonprofit.

"It goes up every year," Jansen said. "There are people who are foreclosing on homes, who have lost their jobs and, in general, are now at an income level where they qualify and need a little bit of help

with food, rent or utility bills."

Thus far, most local nonprofits have been able to absorb the increased demand with additional donor support and funding boosts from government programs, including federal stimulus spending, but Whetzel said she is concerned they won't be able to keep that up.

"The congregations have stepped up a little bit, but it's starting to slip back down," Whetzel said, referring to the religious organizations that Our Daily Bread relies on for much of its support. "I know other nonprofits are having the same issues."

Jansen said Western Fairfax Christian Ministries' food pantry is now fully stocked for the next few months, thanks to the annual Boy Scout food collection, and that "through the generosity of the community" the nonprofit should be able to serve all of its Thanksgiving customers this year.

"We couldn't do it without the donors that come through," Jansen said. "People have big hearts this time of year and really care."

[kschumitz@fairfaxtimes.com](mailto:kschumitz@fairfaxtimes.com)

#### Where to Donate

The following organizations accept food donations to assist Fairfax County residents:

- Annandale Christian Community for Action -- 703-256-0100
- Black Women United for Action, Springfield -- 703-922-5757
- Capital Area Food Bank, Lorton -- 703-541-3063
- Christ House, Alexandria -- 703-548-4227
- Columbia Center for Missions, Falls Church -- 703-534-5700
- Committee for Helping Others, Vienna -- 703-281-7614
- Dar al Hijrah Islamic Center, Falls Church -- 703-531-2912
- Ecumenical Community Helping Others, Springfield -- 703-569-9160
- Facets, Fairfax -- 703-352-5090
- Falls Church Community Service Council -- 703-237-2562
- Family Preservation and Strengthening Services, Oakton -- 703-242-6474
- Floris United Methodist Church, Herndon -- 703-793-0026
- Food for Others, Fairfax -- 703-207-9173
- Groveton Baptist Church, Alexandria -- 703-768-9084
- James Mott Community Assistance Program, Fairfax -- 703-591-1600

- The Koinonia Foundation, Alexandria -- 703-971-1991
- LINK Inc., Sterling -- 703-437-1776
- Lorton Community Action Center -- 703-339-5161
- The Nation Children Inc., Herndon -- 866-533-6629
- Our Daily Bread, Fairfax -- 703-273-8829
- Reston Interfaith Inc. -- 571-323-1400
- Salvation Army -- Alexandria, 703-548-0579; Fairfax, 703-385-8700
- Share Inc., McLean -- 703-284-2179
- Springfield Church of Christ -- 703-451-4011
- St. Anthony's Catholic Church, Falls Church -- 703-820-2011
- St. Mary of Sorrows Catholic Church, Fairfax -- 703-978-4141
- St. Vincent DePaul Society, Fairfax -- 703-284-2080
- Rising Hope United Methodist Church, Alexandria -- 703-360-1976
- United Community Ministries, Alexandria -- 703-768-7106
- Western Fairfax Christian Ministries, Chantilly -- 703-988-9656
- Westwood Baptist Church, Springfield -- 703-451-5120