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Thanksgiving need at area food pantries reaches record levels

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The economy may be showing signs of life, but food pantries and other nonprofit food-distribution agencies around the region say they are struggling to meet record-breaking demand as the holidays approach.

In Loudoun County - the nation's wealthiest county measured by median income - the food pantry is distributing its first-ever Thanksgiving meal, giving food to 2,000 families. In Montgomery County, the Manna Food Center added some Saturday hours for the convenience of working families. And in Fairfax County, the nonprofit Our Daily Bread is facing the grim reality that, although it will feed 2,400 people, it may not be able to help as many 650 needy families at Thanksgiving.

Lynn Brantley, president and chief executive of the Capital Area Food Bank in Northeast Washington, said this year was the most difficult in the organization's 30-year history. The food bank - the main supplier of food to more than 700 agencies and nonprofit groups around the Capital Beltway - will distribute a record-breaking 30 million pounds of food, up from 27 million last year.

"With this economy, things are pretty bleak," Brantley said. "People on Main Street are not rebounding."

Bread lines have become commonplace, including the 3,000 people who waited for groceries and personal-care items in Northeast last week at a giveaway co-sponsored by PepsiCo and the dozens who gathered in front of the Loudoun Interfaith Relief center Friday.

Many are unemployed or underemployed, and their desperation is palpable.

Joyce Crawford used to make a big Thanksgiving spread for her children and grandchildren every year, with turkey, ham, macaroni and cheese, and steaming bowls of collard greens.

That was before - before she lost her job as a secretary, before she went on unemployment and then to a minimum-wage job raking leaves, before she had to give up her place to move in with her 37-year-old daughter. Now, she said, she doesn't have anywhere of her own.

But this Thanksgiving she is determined to cook as usual, even though she's broke and has to squeeze into her daughter's tiny apartment kitchen to do it. For Crawford, it all came down to a donated 12-pound Safeway-brand turkey in a cardboard box. She might not have all the traditional trimmings, but she had that.

"They gave me a turkey, so I am going to cook up this bird!" she said fiercely as she loaded the turkey and bags of groceries into her battered sedan outside the Food for Others pantry in Fairfax.

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Although the unemployment rate in the area is lower than the national average, federal agencies say hunger and poverty here are on the rise.

The rate of those experiencing "food insecurity" - a government term for those unsure where their next meal may be coming from - has risen from 8 percent to 9.2 percent in Virginia, from 12 to 13 percent in the District and from 9 to 11 percent in Maryland, according to U.S. Agriculture Department estimates released this month.

At the Shabach Ministries "empowerment center" in a fraying neighborhood in Landover, a tiny three-bedroom house is stuffed to the bursting point with canned goods and other provisions. The group - the community services arm of the First Baptist Church of Glenarden - gave away groceries to 2,100 residents just four years ago. This year, it will provide help to more than 10,000, another record, said Cynthia Terry, the group's president.

Gwen Pope, the empowerment center's manager, said she has begun seeing a new clientele: the formerly affluent. They have burned through their savings and 401(k) accounts and are just now seeking help.

"You have people driving up in brand-new luxury cars," Pope said, "and they are sleeping in those cars. They are looking for foods that have pop tops to them because they are homeless."

At Shabach Ministries' community food giveaway in September, hundreds of people came from as far away as West Virginia and Baltimore - 72 Zip codes in all - to wait for hours for free groceries and cleaning products.

"They are really suffering," Terry said.

One formerly middle-class woman who was waiting in line in Loudoun County on Friday wept at the "humbling" experience of standing in a food line for the first time. She was too embarrassed to give her name, but she said her Leesburg townhouse is set to be auctioned Dec. 4 and she did not know where her family would go, or how soon after the sale they would be out on the street.

"Hopefully, I'll be able to get through Christmas," she said.

In some cases, charities were scrambling to make up shortfalls from last year, when the growing tide of needy emptied coffers. The Capital Area Food Bank's partners have seen need rise 30 to 100 percent in the recession, Brantley said, and some have had to cut hours, the amount of food given or shutter altogether. Donations in some places have kept pace with the surge in demand, but in others donations have remained frustratingly stagnant.

Liza Whetzel, executive director of Our Daily Bread pantry in Fairfax, spent the week before Thanksgiving sending out last-minute fundraising appeals to cover a wide gap in funding. Otherwise, about 650 families may not get a holiday meal.

"We're trying, but it's a crapshoot," she said.

At the Arlington Food Assistance Center, need has jumped 50 percent in the past two years, according to executive director Charles Meng, but food donations also have increased. The Boy Scouts collected 56,000 pounds of food in a recent drive, about 10,000 pounds more than last year.

Last week, the center began handing out 12-pound Shady Brook Farms turkeys, stuffing, cranberry

sauce and potatoes to its regular clientele.

L. Saba Bekele, 42, a shuttle van driver, waited in line for more than an hour to get her weekly allotment of groceries but then gave her turkey to the Latina woman behind her. The woman's family was bigger, Bekele said. She needed it more.

Outside in the sun, Wanda Whittenburg, 47, dug through her bags after her first visit to the food pantry.

She's employed as a caregiver in a senior living facility, but her finances took a hit this summer when her son, a Northern Virginia Community College student, turned 18 and the family became ineligible for a housing voucher. The amount of rent she had to pay doubled overnight. She has struggled to pay the gas and electric bill and buy food ever since.

Her "darkest hour" came a few weeks ago, when her gas was turned off and she couldn't take a bath or cook.

As a newbie, Whittenburg didn't qualify for a free turkey, but she did get two bags of groceries. Food center workers told her that she could check back this week to see whether there were extra turkeys.

She was hopeful as she sorted through the bag, taking inventory.

"I'm not choosy," Whittenburg said. "I got me a chicken. I got sweet potatoes - I can work with that. Maybe make a sweet potato pie. But no turkey yet.

"I'll keep hope alive."

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