

The myth: Food pantries are primarily for the homeless.

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by donna rolando
Staff Writer

NORTH JERSEY — The myth: Food pantries are primarily for the homeless.

The reality: Most of the area's hungry are working families with full-time jobs.

Month after month, more and more northern New Jersey residents grapple with impossible decisions over which bills to pay in a housing market that caters to the affluent.

When there's not enough to pay the rent and still buy food, they may turn to the Community FoodBank of New Jersey and some 60 pantries in Bergen, Passaic, Morris and Hudson counties for sustenance.

And that's all right, says Olivia, a single mother raising three teens in Paterson who relied on the food pantries during her rise from welfare to work at CUMAC-ECHO, Passaic County's food pantry in the heart of Paterson.

"Don't play the shame game," she says, encouraging those feeling hunger pains to seek help, especially those with kids.

Today, Olivia brings smiles to the faces of children and families as she furnishes food that's healthy through her work with CUMAC-ECHO, which directly feeds more than 21,000 people a year and helps other pantries too.

But at one time, she was strictly on the receiving end.

It took courage to conquer her embarrassment and turn to a food pantry to stretch welfare dollars.

"If God's going to give me a helping hand, I'm going to take it," she figured.

These days when Olivia says, "Everyone falls now and then," she is echoing the sentiments of pantry leaders themselves who try to break stereotypes that only certain kinds of people need food assistance.

In dashing such myths to pieces, food pantries hope to drum up support for charitable opportunities like the North Jersey Media Group's 16th annual Action Against Hunger Food Drive, which will be held on Sunday, Oct. 14, from noon to

4 p.m. at more than 100 locations. (Learn more on the Web at ActionAgainstHunger.com.)

The food drive comes at a time when pantries in New Jersey are experiencing dramatic increases in need. In Bergen County alone, the Center for Food Action saw 50 percent growth – from 25,911 in need of food in 2000 to 38,900 in 2006.

“Despite the amount of wealth in northern New Jersey, it is staggering how many people live below or at the poverty line and how much of a need there is to feed the hungry,” said Jennifer Borg, vice president of the North Jersey Media Group Foundation, which sponsors the food drive.

Statistics show that more than 250,000 people in families live below the poverty level in Bergen, Passaic, Morris and Essex counties, the very people Action Against Hunger hopes to help by collecting 100 tons of food and \$50,000 in cash donations this year.

And it’s not a stretch to think that far more than 250,000 family members are hurting financially to the point where they might not eat. Although the poverty level in 2007 was \$20,650 for a family of four, research indicates a family needs double that amount to meet basic needs.

Yet it often takes hard times to realize the challenges that working families face, and that’s why pantry leaders often find themselves going a step beyond and feeding people’s minds with the truth about the hungry.

“People always think it’s *them* who come to the food pantry,” said Rosemary Gilmartin, executive director of the Interfaith Food Pantry in Morris County, which assisted 1,457 families with almost 600,000 pounds of food in 2006. “I try to make them understand it’s *us*.”

By “*us*,” Gilmartin means predominately working families who can’t master housing and other Jersey living expenses even on full-time hours and even with income from both spouses. Fifty-one percent of the Interfaith Food Pantry’s clients had a salary that couldn’t stretch to buy adequate food in 2006, compared to just four percent on welfare.

Gilmartin identified these working poor as those making less than \$35,000 a year at jobs that are the backbone of New Jersey – teaching assistants, dietitians, nurse’s aides and even clerical staff.

“You have a situation where what you’re paying people can’t keep pace with living expenses,” Gilmartin said, and therefore people are left with impossible choices like whether to pay for groceries or electricity.

That’s where the Community FoodBank of New Jersey and neighborhood food pantries in Bergen, Passaic, Morris and Essex counties enter with a mission to stamp out hunger.

Pantry leaders agree it's a mission that is growing more difficult with each passing year as housing, energy and other costs spiral out of reach but the typical salary raise creeps up ever so slightly.

"Food pantries are getting hit by an even wider population who is really struggling in order to make it," Gilmartin observed.

When family members don't earn more than \$15 an hour, said Gail Farina, site manager at Center for Food Action's state office for pantry operations in Bergen County's Englewood, it's not easy.

"Many times, working families are juggling (financial needs)," said Farina, who sees the pantries as a way to eat and still satisfy other costs of living.

Not only working families unable to stretch their pay to survive but also children and those hampered by old age, sickness and disabilities make up the faces that Olivia and other food pantry workers bring smiles to each week.

"Many of the elderly are on fixed incomes, and 75 to 80 percent of their income goes to rent and utilities, so food becomes an issue," Farina said. "It's the last item on the priority list."

"One of the issues we face is people living with cancer," Gilmartin said on how sickness can wreck both body and budget. Most people don't realize, she said, how even with insurance, medical costs drain bank accounts, leaving a void on the dinner table that the food pantry must try and fill.

For senior citizens, which make up 11 percent of Morris County clients, it's often the struggle to stretch Social Security that creates hunger pains. That's because "what a single adult gets on Social Security doesn't come close to covering anything," Gilmartin said, not at New Jersey prices.

Since it hits almost every segment of the state's population, Gilmartin concluded, "Food and security's a much bigger issue than people realize."

The story's the same at CUMAC-ECHO in Paterson, where office manager Debbie Fletcher is there to step in when the paycheck runs out.

"We deal mostly with family units where all the adults are working and they just can't stretch their income far enough," Fletcher said. "When they get to the end of their paycheck, a lot of times food is short."

Besides working families, which represent 85 percent of its client base, CUMAC-ECHO feeds senior citizens, the disabled and infirm as an outreach of the United Methodist Church.

Some visitors to its Ellison Street pantry are regulars, while others reach out only in the most trying of times.

"Their income is enough for the month to month but then their car breaks down," explains CUMAC research specialist Lynne Bruger of the kind of financial stress that steers people to a pantry.

And one-third of CUMAC's recipients are children and have virtually no control over their path to the pantry, according to Bruger.

"Children, the elderly and the working poor make up the largest category of those experiencing hunger," said Kathleen DiChiara, executive director of Community FoodBank of New Jersey in Hillside, the food warehouse arm of many local pantries.

In Essex County, Meeting Emergency Needs with Dignity (MEND) considers children and the elderly its "most vulnerable neighbors" among those who take comfort from its chain of food pantries.

To care for these "vulnerable neighbors," MEND encourages everyone's participation in the Action Against Hunger Food Drive on Sunday, Oct. 14.

That date will abound with opportunities to make a difference for neighbors in need. Groups and individuals can support the Action Against Hunger Food Drive with food and cash donations. Or, they can join the Greater Hackensack Chamber of Commerce Run and Walk, which will kick off the day's activities 9:30 a.m. in the parking lot of *The Record* at 150 River Street, Hackensack. Registration will begin at 7:30 a.m.

Even from home, it's possible to help by making tax-deductible donations online at ActionAgainstHunger.com or by mail to the North Jersey Media Group Foundation/c/o Legal Department, 150 River St., Hackensack, N.J. 07601.

Those who benefit could be your neighbors.

Courtesy of NorthJersey.com