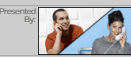


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Food pantries see surge in demand

By Melissa Evans, Staff Writer
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The sour economy has led to a staggering spike in the number of people in need of donated food from pantries and other nonprofits, health officials said Tuesday.

In a recent survey of Los Angeles County food pantries, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank found that 33,729 households sought assistance in 2008 - a 41 percent increase over last year.

"The slowing economy has left many local families struggling to survive," Michael Flood, president of the Los Angeles food bank, said at a press conference Tuesday. "Many of these are families who consider themselves solidly middle class, but factors have changed and they are now having to seek food assistance for the first time."

Officials with the Southern California Regional Foodbank in Long Beach, which serves about 1.5 million individuals each week, say even people with advanced college degrees are seeking help.

"I've been doing this 30 years, and I've never seen anything like this," John Knapp, president of the food bank, said in a separate interview. "Unfortunately, it's probably going to get worse."



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The two food banks serve as warehouses where thousands of charitable pantries buy food to distribute to the poor. Social service workers in the South Bay say they are struggling to keep up with the demand, particularly as the Thanksgiving holiday approaches.

"We've got people coming here from all over, middle class people, asking us not to tell anybody they were here," said Caroline Brady-Sinco, outreach director for Harbor Interfaith Services in San Pedro.

"They've

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hit hard times and they're embarrassed, but they're coming in because they don't know what else to do. People don't realize that those in need of help could be your next door neighbor."

Harbor Interfaith provided turkeys and trimmings for 350 families over Thanksgiving last year - and the same number have already signed up for donations this year. Brady-Sinco estimates the number could jump to as many as 400 by next week.

They hope donors come through to provide supplies, she and others say.

"Right now we're sweating a bit," she said.

His Helping Hands, a pantry run out of Calvary Assembly of God Church in Lomita, has been forced to reduce the size of some of its food allotments in order to serve more families, said Cheryl Petrucci, who runs the pantry.

"Our entire budget is \$800 a month," she said. "There's no way we can feed these people, especially if there's even a slight increase in the cost of food."

She and others say local businesses, including Toyota, Northrop Grumman and Albertsons, have come through. And, for the larger food banks, the government has increased its subsidies for food by about 33 percent.

However, they still are in desperate need of individual donations to fill trucks with gasoline, pay for electricity and fill in the gaps to make up for the increased demand.

Jonathan Fielding, public health director for Los Angeles County who participated in the press conference, pleaded for the public's help at the start of a holiday food drive that begins Thursday.

"In this, the land of plenty, people are having to make due with so little," he said. "This is becoming a middle-class problem, with working families particularly hard hit."

The Los Angeles County Health Survey showed recently that about 10 percent of families in Los Angeles live with "low food security," meaning they don't have enough money to buy enough quality food.

The rise in housing, food and gasoline costs, compounded by the economic downturn, has driven many to the brink of poverty, officials say.

"We want to encourage people to do as much as they can this year," Flood said. "Even people who might be going through difficult times themselves, we need to do everything we can solve this crisis."

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HOW TO HELP: Food banks request cash donations because they can purchase food at a lower cost than the public. To make a donation, contact the Los Angeles Regional Bank at www.lafoodbank.org, the Southern California Regional Foodbank at www.foodbanksofocal.org, Harbor Interfaith Services at 310-831-0603, or His



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