

Food pantries see spike in households in need

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ACTON — On a frigid Wednesday recently, 39 people are waiting in line at the food pantry before the doors open at 10 a.m. The pantry, situated in the large, well-lit basement of St. Matthew's United Methodist Church, is set up like a small grocery store, where customers select what they need based on their household size.

"It's much more dignified for clients to be able to choose what they like and what they'll actually use," says director Kathy Casaletto, who runs the program with volunteers. In this "choice" pantry, people are not just handed a bag of food.

Because of the economy and high unemployment, most area food pantries have seen a surge in demand. Casaletto says Acton serves about 220 households weekly. Even pantries in relatively affluent areas, such as The Open Door in Gloucester, which serves Gloucester, Rockport, Manchester, Ipswich, and Essex, have seen a spike in needs. Demand for services, including a community meals program, is up 22 percent.

For 2009, director Julie LaFontaine estimates the pantry served 1,500 households. According to 2008 Department of Agriculture figures, one in seven Americans is "food insecure," which means they don't have consistent access to adequate amounts of nutritious food. One out of eight uses food stamps.

Most local pantries rely on food and cash donations from their own communities as well as

food from The Greater Boston Food Bank. GBFB has designated January Super Hunger Month and offers several fund-raising events.

"The food bank is a lifeline to fill our shelves," says Casaletto. Depending on local donations, which can ebb and flow throughout the year, Casaletto says Acton receives from 30 to 75 percent of its food from the GBFB; at The Open Door, the average is about 50 percent.

The pantries also depend on the largesse of local supermarkets, food producers, and farms. During the growing season, The Food Project in Lincoln and Gaining Ground in Concord both donated produce to Acton. A food rescue program at The Open Door brings in prepared foods and perishables from local companies, says LaFontaine. "We get



PHOTOS BY SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

In the basement of St. Matthew's United Methodist Church, Dale Cali (above) helps a client at Acton's food pantry, which serves about 220 households weekly. Betty McKee (below) organizes donations. More than 100 volunteers keep the pantry running.



SUPER HUNGER MONTH

Fund-raising events for this month include an online auction, Jan. 17-24; Super Hunger Chef Challenge, Jan. 21, 6-9 p.m., hosted by the Four Seasons Hotel; and Super Hunger Brunch in more than 20 restaurants, Jan. 30-31. Money raised last year at similar events helped The Greater Boston Food Bank supply an additional 350,000 meals to people in need. For more information, go to www.superhungermonth.org.

role is to get food out of this warehouse and into the mouths of hungry people," says Catherine D'Amato, GBFB president and CEO.

Sources of food for the GBFB include supermarkets, manufacturers (pasta, milk, peanut butter), and food drives. It also receives commodities from USDA (turkey, orange juice, sausage patties). Monetary donations and state funding buy additional nutritious foods. D'Amato explains that "72 percent of our inventory has to meet our nutrient quality standards," which includes plenty of fresh produce, lean meats, and dairy protein.

Ming Tsai, chef-owner of Wellesley's Blue Ginger and a chair of the GBFB's Super Hunger Month, encourages a greater emphasis on nutrition. "Now we can discriminate between good food and bad food," he says.

Good food is critical as hunger relief programs struggle to feed their communities. The recession, says The Open Door's LaFontaine, "has brought people who never dreamed they'd use the food pantry."

Community cookbook with a heart

"Cook Food Every Day" (\$20) features recipes, drawings, and amusing commentary from a group of mostly 20- and 30-year-old local artists, musicians, and writers. They offer more than 130 recipes such as sweet potato chili, vegan corned beef hash, bacon-maple caramel corn, and curry. The cookbook includes vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free,

and dairy-free dishes. Proceeds benefit The Greater Boston Food Bank. Available at Sherman Market, 22 Union Square, Somerville, 617-666-0179; Harvard Book Store, 1256 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, 617-661-1515; Porter Square Books, 25 White St., Cambridge, 617-491-2220; or go to cookfoodeveryday.blog.spot.com. LISA ZWIRN

a lot of fish sticks from Gorton's seafood in Gloucester."

Volunteers are a key part of the equation. More than 100 people keep the Acton pantry running. "Our community's always been very generous," says Casaletto, 59, who has volunteered here for eight years.

Dale Cali, 88, is a 19-year Acton pantry veteran who works as a shopper aid on Wednesday mornings. Today, she escorts a Chinese man through the aisles and holds up her fingers to indicate the number of items he can take from each section. Despite language barriers — there

are many Asian, Russian, and Latino immigrants in the area — clients appear to get the foods they want and need. "I point to labels and explain how [the product] is used," says Cali.

"Little" Betty McKee, 88, has volunteered here for 18 years. And Dottie Annis, at 91, is the oldest volunteer. She checks in clients and answers the phone, fielding requests for the occasional delivery to a housebound client and scheduling pick-ups of donated food.

About 600 agencies receive food from the GBFB, which feeds about 321,000 people a year. In their new, expanded facility, millions more pounds of food can be received, stored, and distributed. For the fiscal year that ended in September 2009, 31.5 million pounds went to pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. "Our