

Economy and Food Prices Mean Fewer Pantry Donors

Charitable Groups Stretch to Fill Needs

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Sharp increases in food prices and the unstable economy are creating shortages at food pantries throughout the region as they struggle to keep up with demand.

Calls to the [Capital Area Food Bank's](#) Hunger Lifeline, an emergency food referral, have more than tripled in the past six months, compared with the same period last year.

The food bank, based in Northeast Washington, supplies about 700 agencies and soup kitchens in Northern Virginia, the District and its Maryland suburbs. The food bank's role is crucial in November and December, when an estimated 633,000 residents in the region are at risk of hunger.

[Smithfield Foods](#) and celebrity cook [Paula Deen](#) gave the food bank 25,000 pounds of sliced sandwich meats, pork ribs and hams this month.

"Not only does this donation help the thousands of families who face empty cupboards and suffer quietly, it also shines a spotlight on the escalating issue of hunger during these troubling economic times," said Lynn Brantley, the food bank's president and chief executive.

The Smithfield Foods donation yielded about 100,000 servings of protein for hungry residents. It was expected to be shipped out to pantries within a day, Deen said.

Deen, the host of "Paula's Home Cooking" and "Paula's Party" on the [Food Network](#), worked with Smithfield Foods to launch Helping Hungry Homes. The 10-city tour from January through March distributed enough food to serve a million people.

"I can't cook for everybody, but I can see that as many people get fed as possible," Deen said. "People are so generous around the holidays. But feeding people is a daily problem. It breaks my heart to think of kids going to bed hungry every night. All of us have to do something about it."

About 85 percent of donations to the Capital Area Food Bank come from corporations, including grocery chains, the food bank's chief operating officer, [Brian Smith](#), said. About 4 percent of donations are from individuals, and 11 percent are from the federal government.

"Food donations are down," Smith said. "We rely on donated products, but we don't always get what we need. It's having a staggering effect on the people we serve. We can't

get food out to our member agencies quickly enough, and our stock is turning over so fast."

Across the region, organizations that feed the needy are having a hard time keeping up with requests.

Officials with the Loudoun Holiday Coalition, a county-run group that provides the needy with food, toys, clothing and other items in November and December, say they are worried that the program will run out of supplies for the first time in its 12-year history.

This year, the coalition had received \$9,481 in cash donations through last month, compared with \$29,486 at the same point last year. The number of Loudoun households that received items rose 13 percent, to 1,600, from 2006 to last year. Coordinator Kara Early said she expects a 20 percent increase in demand this year because of the economic downturn.

In [Montgomery County](#), the [Manna Food Center](#) served more than 3,100 families last month, a 48 percent increase over the previous October.

"I'm still stunned by it," Amy Gabala, the center's executive director, said. She predicted record demand for this month and next. "But I think we are going to be able to get by this year because the community is still incredibly generous."

The center, which serves clients directly and provides food to soup kitchens and group homes, prepares 70-pound boxes of perishable and nonperishable food items for individual families in need during the holidays. Each morning the center receives food from grocery stores, such as day-old bread or yogurt with expiration dates that mean it is edible for two weeks.

Gabala said the boxes provide the needy with "food they often can't afford, like fresh produce. It's not just a lot of quantity, but a lot of quality." She added: "I wish I had [Harry Potter](#) powers to expand my warehouse. Every day, someone manages to impress me with their generosity. Every day, I get to see how good people are."

At the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Network, which serves a swath of northwestern and central Virginia that includes [Loudoun County](#), donations have increased in recent months, spokeswoman Ruth Jones said. But the increase has not been enough to offset rising demand, she said.

Staff writer Kafia A. Hosh contributed to this report.