

D.C. Food Bank Plans for Growth Amid Rising Hunger

By [Philip Rucker](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, October 28, 2008; 2:08 PM

The Capital Area Food Bank broke ground today on a state-of-the-art warehouse that will double its food storage capacity, as leaders of pantries and soup kitchens across the Washington region say the struggling economy is forcing more area residents to the brink of hunger.

The nonprofit food bank, the primary distribution center for the region's more than 700 food agencies, is constructing a 125,000-square-foot facility in Northeast Washington that will increase its capacity from 20 million pounds per year to 40 million. The project is estimated to cost about \$36 million, and officials said the capital campaign so far has raised \$29.3 million in public and private funds.

Lynn Brantley, the food bank's president and chief executive, said the new facility will help meet the region's rising demand for free or reduced-cost food.

"We're all called to action," Brantley said. "These are very, very devastating times. . . . We're going to be asked to do a lot more with a lot less."

The poor economy is having a negative impact on the food bank, which has seen cash donations decline about 10 percent from last fall and food contributions go down by 15 percent. Meanwhile, calls from needy residents to the food bank's hunger lifeline have jumped 248 percent over the past six months, chief operating officer Brian Smith said.

So Others Might Eat, a District-based nonprofit group, is serving about 820 meals per day, an increase from last fall of 100 meals per day, executive director Richard Gerlach said.

"People are losing jobs and they're showing up at our soup kitchens," Gerlach said. "As much as the economy is hurting middle-class people, it's hurting poor people even more."

Ed Schafer, secretary of the U.S. Agriculture Department, said, "We find ourselves in some very challenging economic times, and we don't know how much water we're going to have to walk through to get through it."

Four prominent area businessmen chair the fundraising drive for a new food bank: Donald E. Graham, chairman and chief executive of The [Washington Post Co.](#); J.W. Marriott Jr., chairman and chief executive of [Marriott International](#); Abe Pollin, owner of the Washington Wizards; and Bennett Zier, a radio executive.

Marriott said the new facility will help feed more hungry people. "More children can now go to school with a full stomach and more seniors can live with dignity," Marriott said.

The District government is the largest donor to the campaign, giving about \$15 million. Leila Edmonds, director of the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development, said rising food prices and the struggling economy are conspiring to force more families to rely on the food bank and partner agencies.

Michelle Holmes, a volunteer at Covenant Baptist Church, spoke about how the food bank has helped lift her out of chronic hunger.

"The food bank means to me the difference between poverty and destitution," Holmes said. "I'm not out on the corner prostituting, I'm not in the stores shoplifting, I'm not out in the streets selling drugs. I'm trying to make a positive contribution to my community."