

Increase in Individual Gifts Fails To Offset Business Donation Drop

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Washingtonians came out in droves to donate food and money to the Capital Area Food Bank last month as it faced critical shortages caused by a decline in contributions and increase in demand.

Individual cash donations for December more than doubled from 2006, and individual food donations jumped by 15 percent, said officials at the food bank, which is the region's primary distribution center for free and discounted food.

But the spike in individual donations at the Northeast Washington distribution warehouse has done little to help the food bank, which relies heavily on bulk offerings from corporations and grocery stores. Corporate donations for last year dropped 44 percent from 2006, officials said.

And food bank officials fear the country's slumping economy could further erode donations and push more people to the brink of hunger.

"It's such a dichotomy," said Brian Smith, the food bank's chief operating officer. "With a recession, we get less funds, we get less food. But at the same time, in a recession, more people are becoming at risk."

Food banks and soup kitchens across the country face decreasing inventories, which they say stem from a combination of factors. Federal supplies of excess farm goods have dropped, in part because of last summer's drought and because farmers are selling more of their products internationally.

Meanwhile, donations from grocery stores have fallen as supermarket chains have consolidated, increased efficiency and tightened inventory controls.

On Dec. 12, when The Washington Post published a front-page report about shortages at food banks, the Capital Area Food Bank received \$22,905 in cash donations on its Web site, more than was given on any other day last year, officials said.

"People responded to that story," marketing director Kasandra Gunter Robinson said. "On any given Saturday, we're not getting that many donations."

The food bank also heard from many local residents seeking ways to help.

"We had a significant increase in calls not only from individuals, but also a few companies responded quite well," Smith said.

