

New Warehouse to Double Capacity

Organization Breaks Ground, Cites Economy's Effect on Demand

By Philip Rucker
Washington Post Staff Writer
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With the faltering economy driving up demand at food pantries and soup kitchens across the Washington region, the Capital Area Food Bank broke ground yesterday on a state-of-the-art warehouse that will double its food storage capacity.

The nonprofit food bank, the primary distribution center for the area's 700 food agencies, is constructing a 125,000-square-foot facility at 4900 Puerto Rico Ave. in Northeast Washington that will increase its capacity from 20 million pounds a year to 40 million. It is scheduled to open in 2010 and is expected to cost about \$36 million. Officials said the capital campaign so far has raised \$29.3 million in public and private funds.

Some critics said the millions raised would be better spent addressing the root causes of hunger than building a larger food bank. But the economy is pushing more working- and middle-class people to the brink of hunger, and the new facility will accommodate the rising demand for free or reduced-price food, said Lynn Brantley, the food bank's president and chief executive.

"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 economy is having a negative effect on the food bank, which helps feed about 383,000 people in the region each year. Cash donations have fallen about 10 percent from last fall, and food contributions are down 15 percent, Chief Operating Officer Brian Smith said. Meanwhile, calls from needy residents to the food bank's hunger lifeline have jumped 248 percent in the past six months.

Other nonprofit agencies are experiencing similar trends. Bread for the City, which receives about 60 percent of its food from the food bank, is serving more than 11,000 people a month, a 10 percent increase from this time last year.

So Others Might Eat is serving about 820 meals a day, about 100 meals a day more than last fall, Executive Director Richard Gerlach said. "People are losing jobs, and they're showing up at our soup kitchens," Gerlach said.

Speaking at the groundbreaking, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer, said the economy is so challenging that "we don't know how much water we're going to have to walk through."

Across the nation, corporate food donations have fallen as supermarket chains consolidate, increase efficiency and tighten inventory controls. "The technology has

improved, so there's less waste, which means in the food industry less available for donation," Smith said.

Some advocates for the hungry criticized the expansion plans. "I find it hard to justify any organization that relies on donations growing in an economy that's most likely going to see a decrease in supply," said Robert Egger, president of D.C. Central Kitchen.

Mark Winne, a hunger expert and author of "Closing the Food Gap," said food banks were established in the 1970s and '80s to be emergency food sources but have become permanent fixtures in U.S. cities.

"It's kind of like a ship that's taking lots of water," Winne said. "It's really hard to steer a new course when all hands are on deck to plug the leaks. . . . We have never been able to steer a new course to address the underlying causes of hunger."

At yesterday's groundbreaking, Michelle Holmes, a volunteer at Covenant Baptist Church, said 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."

The District government is the largest donor to the new food bank, giving about \$15 million. "Increases in food prices, coupled with the struggling economy, mean more families will need the food bank's assistance," said Leila Edmonds, director of the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development.

Four prominent area businessmen chair the fundraising drive: 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 at Umansky Wyatt Zier Consulting.

Marriott said the new facility will benefit the community. "More children can now go to school with a full stomach and more seniors can live with dignity," he said.