

The Washington Post

Capital Area Food Bank to begin charging members for produce

By [Annie Gowen](#), Published: June 24, 2011

For the first time in its history, the Capital Area Food Bank will begin charging its members for fruits and vegetables July 1, adding thousands in unexpected costs for some of the 700 agencies that rely on the organization to feed the region's hungry.

The fee, 10 cents per pound, is needed to help offset the rising cost of food, which hit an all-time high globally this year and is projected to increase between 3 and 4 percent in the United States by the end of the year, officials said.

The food bank, the region's main provider of food for the poor, has spent \$1 million more than expected on fresh produce this year and needs help with its own skyrocketing costs, said Mark McCaffrey, the food bank's chief operations officer.

"We don't want to have to do this, but we're in such a bind," McCaffrey said. "It's to try and help us out on transportation and food costs so we can keep the healthy food going out the door."

For the [Food for Others](#) pantry in Fairfax, the new fee will amount to about \$40,000 — a quarter of its budget for purchased food — in the coming year for vegetables that were once free. "It is a big hit," said Roxanne Rice, the pantry's executive director.

The new fee is just one of the initiatives launched in the Washington area by agencies that help the poor, whose demands have remained high despite modest improvements in the economy.

[Bread for the City](#), the District's largest food pantry, is planning to organize volunteers this summer for "harvest parties" to scavenge fruit from trees in accessible public spaces, as well as in private back yards with the owners' permission.

"All the hunger relief organizations are trying hard to think outside the box," said Sharon Gruber, Bread for the City's nutrition consultant. "The food we're providing for our clients should be healthy, and when it's expensive, we have to think creatively."

The organization, which feeds 4,500 families monthly, will work with Casey Trees, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering the city's tree canopy, to identify the city's fruit trees. The "urban gleaning" venture is expected to begin in August.

Petworth resident Leonard Edwards, 49, who began collecting food stamps recently when his hours at a job with a local nonprofit group were cut, plans to be a part of the new team of urban foragers.

“Times are hard right now. You have to get your healthy foods any way, shape or form you can,” said Edwards, who has seen his grocery bill rise nearly 30 percent in the past year. “You can’t afford a \$6 eggplant at Whole Foods. . . . It costs \$3 for one red bell pepper!”

Edwards already has been trading his sweat equity for vegetables this summer at a [new rooftop garden](#) that Bread for the City planted at its Seventh Street headquarters. The organization hopes the beets, corn and peppers growing there will augment the 60,000 pounds of produce it already gleans from local farmers.

Last week, Edwards’s efforts were rewarded with his first take-home harvest: two eggplants, a fragrant bunch of basil and several chile and banana peppers. He uses those to season his pot of cabbage — stretching the meal from Sunday to Wednesday. On Wednesday, he was again weeding on the roof in the hot sun, plucking a bouquet of cilantro that he hoped to add to a cold pasta salad.

“I don’t have any money to go to the store and get fresh cilantro,” he said. “Here, it doesn’t cost an arm and a leg. It’s a big help.”

Overall, U.S. food prices were 3.5 percent higher this May than last, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Consumer Price Index. The price of fruits and vegetables rose 2 percent, while the prices of beef and pork were up 10 percent and milk was up 12 percent. But food prices in the United States are not increasing as fast as they did in 2008.

However, global food prices hit a [historic high this year](#) because of the higher feed costs for grain and livestock, rising fuel costs, and overseas demand, according to Patrick Westhoff, who directs the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute at the University of Missouri.

Although in recent days there has been a downward trend in corn and wholesale food prices, Westhoff predicts overall food prices will continue to rise about 4 percent — in keeping with Consumer Price Index estimates — through the end of the year, provided there are no more major weather disasters.

“It’s a big increase from last year, and it’s more than overall inflation,” Westhoff said. “For anybody who spends a large portion of a small income on food, this is a big deal, obviously.”

Meanwhile, Congress is weighing a budget proposal with more than \$800 million in cuts to food assistance programs, including \$733 million from the WIC nutrition program that could affect more than 300,000 women and children.

“For a low-income household that spends more of their income on food, a change in the price of milk is significant,” said Elaine Waxman, vice president of research for [Feeding America](#), the

country's coalition of food banks. "It's like the perfect storm: high [hunger], high unemployment and now we're looking at food prices increasing at the highest rates we've seen in 20 years."

Waxman says that the 43 million Americans who receive food stamps and the working poor are the hardest hit by rising prices because their food dollar is not stretching nearly as much.

An added burden locally is the high cost of living, the 11th-highest in the country, according to the [Council for Community and Economic Research](#), which tracks the index quarterly.

District resident Stephanie Galloway, a 55-year-old receptionist, has seen her monthly grocery bill for herself and her 13-year-old granddaughter rise from about \$90 to \$150 in the past year. She's had to cut out snacks and red meat, shop at three stores to get the best deals and augment her groceries with a small ration of food from Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church food pantry.

She said they have not gone hungry yet — no "missed meal cramps" — but she sometimes sacrifices and eats a piece of bread or a bowl of beans while reserving the day's dinner for Jessica, a rising freshman in the District. But if prices rise any further, she can't be sure what will happen.

"We might have to be like Tarzan and Jane and live in trees and eat leaves," she said. "Everything's going up, except for paychecks."