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Lake County: Food pantries try to keep hunger at bay

Lake County pantries dig deep to combat rising demand for help

By Ralph Zahorik Special to the Tribune

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Ricardo Fernandez of Waukegan accepts food from volunteers at a mobile food pantry last week in Zion, a stop on Lake County officials' bus tour of food pantries in the county

Growing unemployment and a sputtering economy have boosted the demand for free food, officials saw firsthand during a recent tour of distribution centers in **Lake County**.

Led by the Lake County Community Foundation, the tour stopped at a warehouse in **Park City** operated by the Northern Illinois Food Bank, and a distribution van in **Zion**, where about 200 people stood in a cold rain, some for more than an hour.

Each person loaded up boxes or laundry baskets with about 40 pounds of frozen chicken, beef and pork, plus potatoes, bananas and packaged salads -- fresh fare usually not available in area food pantries -- plus breakfast cereal and taco kits.

The spike in need is because of the 10.5 percent unemployment rate in Lake County, up from 6.5 percent a year ago, according to Dennis Smith, executive director and CEO of the **St. Charles**-based food bank, which covers 13 counties outside of Cook.

The number of people visiting the 525 food pantries, soup kitchens and youth locations across the region has gone up 35 percent from a year ago, Smith said.

"A lot of the people we're seeing today have never been to a food pantry before," he said during the Oct. 22 tour.

More would have turned out if it had not been raining so hard, organizers said.

"It'll help," said Carol, a 52-year-old woman from Zion who stood in line at the van with three of her 14 children. Eight of her children still live at home, she said.

Carol, who asked that her last name not be used, said she received food once from a food pantry operated by her church and that this was her first visit to the van. She gave high marks to the fresh food aboard the van parked at the Zion-Benton Community Resource Center at the former Pearce campus of Zion-Benton High School.

Her diabetic husband is disabled and has been unable to work for more than six weeks at his factory job in **Waukegan**. He received a disability check from his employer only the day before, she said, but the food helps bridge the gap between work and hunger.

"He's close to going back to work," Carol said.

Ricardo Fernandez, 59, a Waukegan resident, stood in line with his friend, Maria Lopez, who said she has six children at home. Fernandez said he does construction and handyman jobs but has not been able to find work for months. His children are grown and live in [Arizona](#), he said.

Except for its van operation, the Northern Illinois Food Bank supplies hundreds of food pantries and soup kitchens, buying and receiving food by the semi-load, storing it in warehouses and distributing it across Lake County and to communities throughout the region outside [Chicago](#).

A year ago the bank was distributing about 2.3 million pounds of food per month. In September, the figure was about 3 million pounds.

"Hunger is exploding in northern Illinois and the small agencies are being hit harder than ever before," Smith said.

In fiscal 2008, the agency trucked 22 million pounds of food. Last year, the figure climbed to 27.5 million pounds. Smith expects the figure to hit 36 million pounds this year.

For now, there's enough food to go around, Smith said. Federal purchases of farm commodities for food programs rose to \$250 million this year from \$140 million last year, he noted.

Pantries, mostly volunteer-run, have sometimes run out of food because of demand on a given day. But Smith said there is enough food available for the long haul. The problem, he said, is organization.

"They're going to have to work a little bit harder, stay open more days," he said.

Tour participants boarded their bus in [Lake Forest](#). The six-hour event was organized because "A lot of people (in southeast Lake County) know about the need in Chicago, but they don't know about the need in north Lake County," said Sylvia Zalidver-Sykes, executive director of the Lake County Community Foundation, a Waukegan-based affiliate of the Chicago Community Trust.

"We want the community to know there's a need in their own backyard," said foundation spokeswoman Susan Niederlander.

The visitors, mostly from Lake Forest, [Lake Bluff](#) and Highland Park, helped pass out food in Zion and sampled a 625-calorie after-school "super snack" served to about 3,000 needy youngsters daily at 17 Lake County sites.

It's a ham-and-cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread, carrots, an apple, pretzels and chocolate milk.

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