



Priest Bob Lombardo of the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels, a Catholic outreach on the west side of Chicago, addresses volunteers before they help distribute food to those in need.

By John Gress for USA TODAY

Food pantries mobilize as ranks of hungry grow

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By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

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"I've never seen this type of demand before. As a food bank, you just think if you can make it through the summer and the holiday season, you can breathe a little easier because the load gets a little lighter. But this year that has not been the experience. It's been full-throttle every day."

— Denise Holland, head of Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia, S.C.

As the economy falters and food prices seemingly rise as fast as the unemployment rolls, the face of hunger is evolving.

When Jennifer McLean, vice president of operations of New York's City Harvest, sees those lining up for help, she notices the schoolteacher standing in line at the food pantry. The cab driver calling his church for help. And more children whose families do not have enough to eat.

"The third and fourth ripple of a Lehman Bros. closing is the dry cleaner, the car service employee ... who may have never turned to a soup kitchen or food pantry (before) who may turn to it for the first time in their lives," McLean says.

Need is immediate

To address a potentially unprecedented need for emergency food starting this winter, Feeding America, the USA's largest hunger relief charity, is announcing today the launch of a national fleet of mobile pantries to carry fresh vegetables and other groceries to the hungry.

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Volunteers at a pantry in Chicago prepare food for distribution.

Feeding America will receive \$4.5 million from Kraft Foods to purchase 25 refrigerated trucks over three years that will be dispatched to rural communities and urban pockets across the nation where grocery stores and food pantries are difficult to get to or find.

"We certainly understand in this difficult economic environment ... this issue is more important than ever, and it's one of the reasons we've chosen to step up at this time to try and address it," says Irene Rosenfeld, Kraft's chairwoman. She says the pantries are just one piece of a planned \$180 million effort by Kraft to combat hunger.

Food banks in New York City, Chicago, Newberry, S.C.; San Antonio, Madison, Wis.; Cincinnati; and California's Central Valley will receive the first pantries by early spring. The rest will be rolled out in the next two years.

If they make three trips a week, the new pantries each can pass out groceries equaling 1.1 million meals a year.

The need is immediate. In a national survey in October commissioned by Kraft, 45% of respondents said recent economic changes had jeopardized their ability to provide enough food for their families; 56% of those earning \$25,000 or less a year said they are more likely to use a food pantry than they were six months earlier; and 42% of

households making \$50,000 to \$75,000 knew people who were seeking aid for food.

Among Feeding America's 206 food banks, the need for services has risen at least 15% this year, says Vicki Escarra, the group's president. Some of those emergency food providers have witnessed even greater increases.

"I've never seen this type of demand before," says Denise Holland, head of Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia, S.C., which will receive one of the mobile pantries.

"As a food bank, you just think if you can make it through the summer and the holiday season, you can breathe a little easier because the load gets a little lighter," she says. "But this year that has not been the experience. It's been full-throttle every day."

Holland says that the 400 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters her food bank supplies in 20 counties saw a 55% increase in demand in September compared with September 2007. Many of those in need had never had to ask for food before.

"There are people who are calling us ... who've said, 'In the past I've been a donor. I can't donate now. I need the help, I need your services,' and that's been really heart wrenching," Holland says.

The mobile pantries will set up shop in church parking lots, at community centers or in other central spots, then allow families to choose foods that will help them prepare healthy meals.

Besides saving those already struggling from having to buy gas or find transportation to a quality supermarket, a key benefit of the mobile pantries is providing fresh produce in communities where nutrition often suffers because the nearest store stocks starches and cigarettes but not vegetables.

"In Chicago, like many urban communities, we have neighborhoods where you can literally go for miles without finding a grocery store," says Kate Maehe, executive director of the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Its 600 food pantries in September saw a 30% increase in visitors over last year.

Mobile pantries offer choice and dignity

With mobile pantries, where the food is fresh and free, people have choices they might not have otherwise when they are handed a pre-assembled grocery bag at a traditional pantry, she says.

"With that comes dignity," she adds.

Some food banks say that donations of canned goods and funds have dipped during this economic crisis. But they hope that with so many Americans struggling to make ends meet, the nation will make a greater effort to address the ubiquity of hunger.

"If there is a silver lining in the chaos going on in our financial market right now, it's that perhaps people will realize that this is a reality for way too many people," Maehe says. "There's an assumption that hunger is something that exists in a couple of bad neighborhoods. It's in every city and in every state in our country."