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Hunger doesn't end with holidays, pantry officials point out

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URBANA - Food drives and food baskets are plentiful this time of year as charities help needy families stock up for the holidays.

Come January, that generous holiday spirit tends to wane, and it's back to the food pantry line for many working poor.

Even as the number of families seeking help continues to climb, there isn't as much rice, pasta, peanut butter or canned vegetables on food bank shelves this year to supply area pantries.

A "perfect storm" of factors - high energy costs, rising food prices, a drop in government commodities and increased demand - has put a dent in food supplies, especially in the northeast and Midwest, officials say.

For the first quarter of this fiscal year, the Eastern Illinois Foodbank was down about 200,000 pounds of food over last year, or almost 16 percent, said spokeswoman Lisa Bralts. Warehouse shelves that were stacked with food just two years ago now stand empty.

"It's significant," Bralts said.

The agency distributes about 5 million pounds of food annually to area food pantries, soup kitchens and other agencies.

Demand is being driven up by the rising costs of food, housing, utilities, health care and gasoline, while food manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers are finding they have less surplus food to donate.

"We started to see a decrease in donated food last year. Instead of bouncing back, it just continued to decrease," Bralts said.

The food bank will likely hit its \$65,000 fundraising goal from this fall's Food for Families Drive, and while food donations were down a bit, the quality was better - just one can of 15-year-old nacho cheese dip, for example. But the bulk of the food bank's supplies come from national donation programs, Bralts said.

"Those larger donations aren't coming in with the frequency that they used to," she said. "We have to search further and further afield for food, and that costs more."

Executive Director James Hires said the shortfall would be closer to 23 percent if the food bank hadn't increased the amount of food it bought by 250 percent this year, from 59,700 to 152,000 pounds. The food bank can buy food at a fraction of retail prices, but it still costs money to do it, he said.

"We're scrambling," he said.

Food supplied through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's commodities program - which buys up surplus food and redistributes it to states - has also dwindled over the last five years. The 2002 farm bill did not provide cost-of-living increases, so the purchasing power of the commodities budget fell as food prices rose. Making matters worse, Congress has delayed passing the 2007 farm bill, which increases commodities funding, Bralts said.

Ordinarily, the commodities program makes up 20 percent of the food bank's supplies.

"There are so many parts to this," Hires said. "If all works perfectly well, we're in great shape. If one of the pieces falls out, it has a domino effect."

The USDA's annual hunger survey last week showed more than 35.5 million people in the United States were hungry in 2006, about the same as the previous year. But heads of food banks and pantries say many more people are seeking assistance, forcing some agencies to cut portions. At the Society of St. Vincent DePaul food pantry in Cincinnati, clients now get three or four days' worth of food instead of six or seven.

"We have food banks in virtually every city in the country, and what we are hearing is that they are all facing severe shortages with demand so high," said Ross Fraser, a spokesman for American's Second Harvest, the national food bank network.

Bralts expects demand to rise even more after the first of the year, when winter heating bills start to hit home. So far it's been fairly warm, she said, and "people haven't seen those kinds of increases yet."

Hunger experts also predict food prices will go up again as the industry passes on rising transportation costs from \$3-a-gallon gasoline.

"People don't realize that hunger, food insecurity and poverty happen 365 days a year," Bralts said. "We need to take care of people after the holidays, too."