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Local

Demand, fewer supplies hurt food pantries

The Associated Press

2007-12-05 19:22:00.0

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ST. LOUIS -

Each winter, increased demand for food and fewer supplies stretch food pantries, but this year, they're even skimpier.

The federal government has reduced its contributions and food industry donations are stagnant.

The large walk-in freezer at the [St. Louis Area Foodbank](#) is practically empty. Its giant warehouse shelves are thinly stocked, too. And outside, where workers from area food pantries and soup kitchens haul boxes of food from a loading dock, delivery vans and trucks idle, half empty.

"Demand is high and there's less food," [Matt Dace](#), associate director of the food bank, told the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#). "Food sources have been drying up."

The food bank is a primary source of food for about 500 agencies in [Missouri](#) and [Illinois](#).

St. Louis-area food pantries say the federal government has reduced its food contributions this year by 700,000 pounds, and the food industry's donations have grown stagnant.

Some area pantries have closed their doors, others have cut down their service hours. Still others are dipping into meager savings to buy food from discount stores.

"I gave out what I got, and my shelves are empty," said [Lizzie Harrison](#), of the Emmanuel Seventh-day Adventist food pantry in St. Louis. The pantry has cut its food service to two times a month from four. "We don't get nearly what we used to."

For people who depend on the food pantries, the shortages are starting to hurt. [Antonio Wilson](#), of St. Louis, memorizes which days of the month food pantries are open. An unemployed driver, Wilson says he goes from one pantry to the next, looking for food to fill his cabinets. Increasingly, he's finding the pantries closed or giving out less than they have in the past.

About one-third of the food distributed by the St. Louis Area Foodbank comes from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), which buys surplus food from farmers for distribution to the hungry. But over the past three years, purchases have dropped sharply. In 2004, the program distributed \$233 million worth of food nationally. In 2006, the figure dropped to \$67 million.

In part, the program is buying less food because [U.S.](#) farmers are harvesting record crops, and demand for food on the open market is strong.

The St. Louis Area Foodbank has seen a decrease of 700,000 pounds of food, out of the roughly 13 million pounds it distributes each year, because of the commodity program cuts. That means less food for pantries, which have to look to already strained churches or social service groups.

Food providers are looking to the Farm Bill, currently stalled in the [U.S. Senate](#), for relief. [Frank Finnegan](#), executive director of the St. Louis Area Foodbank called the bill "our shining hope."

Much of the food distributed by food banks comes from giant food corporations. But their efficiency is leaving less to contribute to the hungry.

The saviors this year have been the [Boy Scouts of America](#), who collected more than 2 million cans of food - a new record - at their November food drive, the nation's largest single food gathering event.

Still, food pantry operators, are worried.

"People are just storing up for themselves. There's uncertainty," said [Lawrence Staple](#) of the [George Washington Carver](#) House. "We'll get through it. We just need to make it through the winter."

Information from: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, <http://www.stltoday.com>

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