

## Local food banks would benefit from budget

*BY ADAM TESTA, THE SOUTHERN*

The Benton-West City Ministerial Alliance food pantry served twice as many people last month as it did in January 2007, but assistance may be on the way after a proposal from Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Blagojevich included a commitment of \$5 million to the Illinois Food Bank Association in the proposed 2009 state budget he presented last week. This additional funding would allow the IFBA to purchase an additional 7 million pounds of food and create a statewide mobile pantry, according to a press release from the organization.

The state association will then distribute food to the eight America's Second Harvest food banks in the state, including the St. Louis Area Foodbank and the Tri-State Food Bank, which serve the entirety of Southern Illinois between them.

These organizations will then distribute food and funding to local pantries and soup kitchens in their territories, with allocations being based on poverty levels and unemployment, said Mary Blair, executive director of the Tri-State Food Bank.

Allocations are determined in this manner "so that we know these counties are getting the food to help the people who need it the most," Blair said. She specifically mentioned Alexander County, where poverty affects about 24 percent of the population.

David Hultberg, treasurer of the Benton-West City Ministerial Alliance, said the governor's commitment would be a great benefit for his organization, bringing in 5,000 pounds of food per month on average. Hultberg expects the large increases over last year to continue.

With state and national economies in their current condition, pantries are seeing fewer donations and more people in need of food, Blair said.

"Everything seems to be going up except the paycheck," she said.

Frank Finnegan, Blair's counterpart at the St. Louis Foodbank, said the creation of a mobile pantry will also allow the organizations to better serve the people of Southern Illinois.

"We would fill it up in our warehouse and drive it out to the counties there," he said, adding that multiple mobile pantries would cover the state, with one from his agency reaching Carbondale and other Southern Illinois cities.

Mobile pantries would be especially helpful in distributing produce and other products with limited shelf lives, he said.

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