

State helps fill local food pantries' shelves

Belleville News-Democrat

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April 19, 2008



Derik Holtmann/bnd

Cahokia Community Basket volunteers Bob "Bebop" Darnell and Joyce Hogeland unload a pallet of greenbeans and pasta Friday. Governor Blagojevich administration officials and the St. Louis Area Foodbank announced today more than 126,000 pounds of food are being delivered to southwestern Illinois food pantries through the Food for Families program.

Citing a growing need, state and local officials announced Friday that 126,000 more pounds of food are being delivered to Southwestern Illinois food pantries.

The food is being provided through the Food for Families program.

Food banks in Illinois receive food donations through local food companies, food drives, and through the federal government. However, surplus products provided by the USDA have decreased as have donations from food manufactures.

In the past four years there has been a 40 percent decrease in federal product, officials said at a press conference Friday.

Last year, Gov. Rod Blagojevich provided an additional \$1 million from the state's budget to help supplement the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the USDA's contributions and has proposed an additional \$5 million for 2009.

"Some of the products purchased with this money are wonderful shelf-stable items," said Frank Finnegan, executive director of the St. Louis Area Foodbank. "We want to supplement what the government and donations provide with items that help create an entire meal."

Finnegan said they also plan to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables with some of the money when it becomes available. He said most of the families served are part of the working poor who are trying to pay bills and transportation costs and still put food on the table.

Kathy Schlemmer, director of the Cahokia Community Basket, said her pantry serves between 150 and 300 families a week.

"When school lets out for the summer, our need goes up," she said. "Since the schools are supplying lunches, families need more food to make up the difference."

Those who have a need are asked to fill out an eligibility form.

"We are sensitive to the privacy of individuals," Finnegan said. "Our goal is to treat everyone with respect."

Schlemmer said the governor's commitment to helping the Food for Families program will ensure that food is available for thousands of hungry people who turn to food pantries for help.