

Local food pantries bracing Summer surge in demand expected

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By Kate Braser

When mounting gas and food prices take their toll on family breadwinners, their last hope is often a food pantry, and local pantry coordinators are bracing for a difficult summer.



JASON CLARK / Courier & Press Carl Todd, warehouse supervisor at the Tri-State Food Bank in Evansville, transports food items on a skid while preparing an order for Martin's Cloak Food Pantry in Siberia, Ind., on Wednesday. Todd has been working with the food bank for more than 20 years.

Some agency and community leaders interested in eliminating hunger in the Tri-State will gather today at the Eykamp Scout Center for a "Making Ends Meet" workshop.

Sponsored by the Tri-State Food Bank, the annual event will include seminars by community nonprofit and government leaders.

Today's meeting comes at a time when those in charge of pantries and food banks are looking for ways to meet increasing demand with dwindling supplies.

Mary Blair, director of the Tri-State Food Bank, cites high grocery, gas and utility prices as reasons why she is predicting a challenging summer.

"These things are going to be hitting people," she said. "There are a lot of people who were struggling but getting by. Unless things turn around quickly, those people will need to come to us for assistance, and we need to be prepared."

But Blair said donations to food banks are down, largely because the national food industry is enacting stricter quality controls and selling more food through secondary markets that used to be donated to food banks.

"Of course, that's probably good fiscal policy for them, but it has impacted us with a decline in donations," she said. "We have to purchase food to make it up. When we have to purchase, it hits our budget harder."

Blair said totals for the past few months are not yet available, but in the quarter ending in March, the food bank saw a 10 percent increase in the number of people requesting resources.

"And that was before gas hit \$4 a gallon," she said. "We haven't seen the numbers from that yet."

Blair said the increase in fuel costs is hitting the food bank, too.

"We deliver to 33 counties," she said. "So we have doubled up on some deliveries and rearranged some of our routes."

Grant Hartman, coordinator of the Evansville Emergency Food Pantry System, spent hours this week tending a garden at the Evansville State Hospital. He hopes the one-third acre plot will produce thousands of pounds of vegetables for pantries this summer.

"It's too early to have any numbers calculated yet, but it looks like the numbers are up already this summer," Hartman said of demand for pantry services. "Plus, we are seeing people who are coming to us for the first time in higher numbers than before, just within the past month."

The Evansville Emergency Food Pantry System includes seven pantries that provided 464,000 meals last year, but Hartman said meeting that demand is hard.

The garden project is being executed by the Master Gardeners and local Eagle Scouts.

The harvest will go to Tri-State Food Bank, then be distributed to food pantries.

"Last year we had over 3,000 pounds, and the year before it was 2,500 pounds from this garden," Hartman said. "This year we are hoping for more if the weather cooperates."

Grace Baptist Church in Evansville offers a food pantry, and Sara Burk, chair of the missions team, said 529 families — or a total of 1,028 people — were fed in May, including 95 new families.

Burk said that number is not as high as a year ago, when 575 families were served, or 1,802 people. That total included 112 first-time families.

She said 561 families were fed in April, "So we are not really running more than past months either."

Kathy Hedge, director of the Newburgh Area Food Pantry, said the demand has been constant there, too.

"For January through May, we average 130 families and are right at that average," she said. "Last month we served 413 people."

Burk said she is waiting to see what the effect of increased gas and food prices will be. "We anticipate more people needing us soon, so this year the demand might go up and the supply down," she said.

"Donations are normally down in summer to begin with, and now everyone is putting more money in their gas tank and grocery bill. Sometimes that can impact donations too."