

Pantries in affluent areas running low

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By Emily S. Achenbaum

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Call it a sign of just how bad the economy has gotten: A food bank in one of the Chicago area's wealthiest townships is pleading for donations, saying it cannot keep up with residents' needs.

Staff at a food pantry in New Trier Township, which includes exclusive North Shore communities like Wilmette, Winnetka and Glencoe, said they've had 12 percent more people come to them in need of basic food supplies. At the same time, as at many social service organizations nationwide, the tight economic climate means donations to the food pantry have dropped.

Last week, the pantry was forced to change its rules from allowing a family to get food once a week to once every two weeks.

"We've hit the point where we just don't have enough," Supervisor Patricia Cantor said. "We're in real trouble here."

Nationally, food banks are seeing a 15 percent to 20 percent increase in the number of people they serve compared with the number of people helped last year, according to America's Second Harvest, a national charitable hunger-relief organization based in Chicago.

In May, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which serves 600 member pantries, said its demand also was up 12 percent for the year, and there was a decrease in donations. The Depository said rising gas and food prices likely were behind the decrease in donations.

New Trier Township Social Services Administrator Bette Vitale said the pantry already has served 158 people this year, compared with 228 people over all of 2007.

Cantor said the people coming to the pantry have varied from working-class families to elderly residents on fixed incomes to once-wealthier families struggling with a sudden layoff.

An individual must make less than \$20,800 a year to receive free food from the pantry's shelves.

"Their unemployment went longer than expected, and the home is about to go into foreclosure," Cantor said. "[Coming to the pantry] is a very, very difficult step for people to take. This is not their first course."

Other food banks in affluent areas say their supplies are being taxed. In west suburban Hinsdale, donations to Hinsdale Community Service's food bank traditionally drop during the summer, but this year they are "down, down, down," said Martina Shera, executive director. A

July 4 fundraiser that normally raises \$5,000 to \$7,000 in cash and checks during the parade barely netted about \$1,000 this year.

"We usually get enough groceries that we can stock our shelves for the entire month," Shera said. "And we get enough money that allows us to purchase grocery items for the pantry for three months. But I didn't get enough food and I definitely didn't get enough money to order anything."

Donations to the New Trier Township Food Pantry may be dropped off at 739 Elm St., Winnetka. The office is open from 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Call 847-446-8201.

The pantry is especially requesting tuna, cereal, canned fruit, cake mixes, rice, salt, pepper and household items including shampoo, laundry detergent, facial tissue, toilet paper and paper towels.

To donate to Hinsdale Community Service, bring items to 19 E. Chicago Ave., Hinsdale. Call 630-323-2500.

To donate to the Greater Chicago Food Depository, call 773-843-2657.