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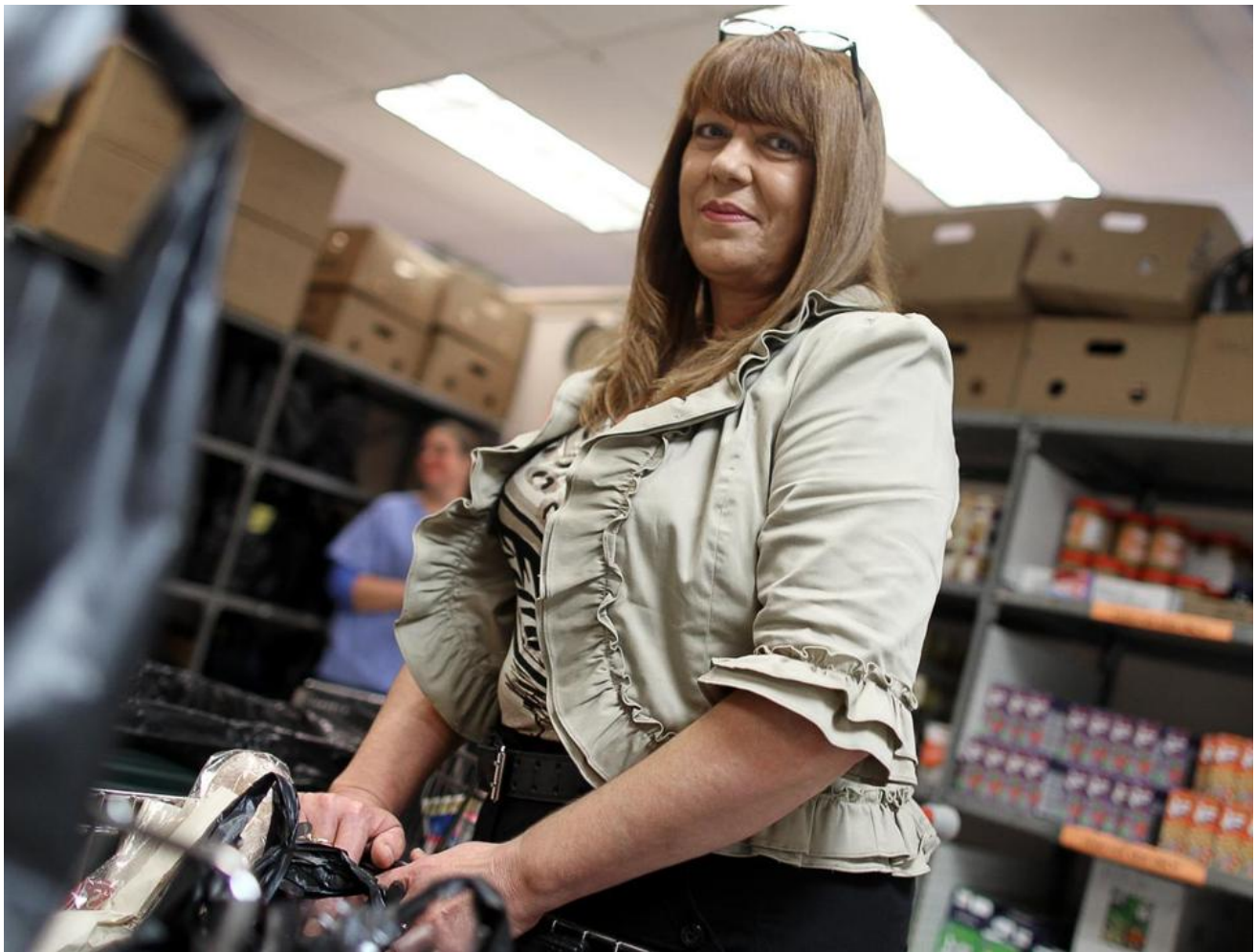
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South

A growing hunger

In a sagging economy with high unemployment, food pantries are once again struggling to keep up with demand

By **Johanna Seltz** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 23, 2011



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Lynne Stent is the manager at the Charity Guild Food Pantry in Brockton. The need for food assistance has surged in recent weeks.

The cupboards are increasingly bare at food pantries around the region as the number of people looking for help feeding their families has surged in recent weeks.

“They are people without jobs, people losing homes, people working low-income jobs; the paradigm is the same, it’s just more and more of it,” said Pat Adams, director of the Weymouth Food Pantry.

She said that 630 families used her pantry in September - up from a steady 500 a month for more than the last two years.

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“We have never, ever, ever had that many families before,” said Adams. “I cannot say if this is a trend; I have to wait and see what next month brings. The only thing I can definitely say is that, as far as the recession goes, it’s really not getting any better.”

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Pantries from Dedham to Plymouth to Brockton have similar statistics, and stark stories of men, women, and children in danger of going hungry. Some people have run out of unemployment benefits, while others are working two or three low-paying jobs and still can’t make ends meet, according to pantry officials.

My Brother’s Keeper, which delivers free food in Brockton and Easton, gets lots of calls from elderly and disabled people, as well as women with young children, according to manager Beth Sheehan. She’s also hearing, though, from a larger percentage of working people who have never asked for help before.

“Taking the calls, I can just tell how desperate people are,” Sheehan said. “One woman I talked to on the phone [told] me she had nothing to eat in her home except the ice cubes in her freezer.”

At the food pantry in the Germantown Neighborhood Center in Quincy - where demand is up 40 percent from July, to 2,446 heads of households receiving aid so far

this month - executive director Katherine Quigley said she is also seeing more first-time pantry users.

“It’s very devastating for them - you can see in their body language how uncomfortable they are,” she said. “I can’t tell you the number of individuals who say, ‘I can’t believe I’m here. I’ve always been on the giving end.’”

“They’re people that can’t pay the gas, the electricity, the rent. [A lot of them] are doubling up [and living] with other family members. We try to be as delicate as possible so they don’t have to face any more humiliation,” Quigley said.

Keeping up with the demand is difficult, she said. “It’s very disheartening when you open the food pantry and [two hours later] you have to tell everyone in line that we’ve run out and can you come back tomorrow” after the next delivery, she said.

Quigley gets food twice a week from the Greater Boston Food Bank, which supplies free groceries to food pantries and shelters in all of Eastern Massachusetts. Last year, the food bank distributed 36.7 million pounds of food, or the equivalent of 28.2 million meals, according to spokeswoman Stacey Wong. Two years ago, the figure was about 31.5 million pounds, she said.

“Overall, we’re distributing more food than ever, but the need has [gone up], so individual agencies are working harder to feed their clients,” Wong said.

The food bank is working harder as well, she said. The US Department of Agriculture cut its contribution by about 20 percent this fiscal year - the equivalent of about 1.3 million meals, she said. That has meant less frozen chickens, canned tomatoes, cereal, and pasta.

The food bank also is trying to stretch the \$11.5 million contribution it received this year from the state’s emergency food assistance program - a figure that stayed the same as last fiscal year although food prices went up, she said.

Retailers, corporations, and individuals have taken up the slack with increased donations, Wong said. Stop & Shop, for example, donates 7,000 turkeys for

Thanksgiving, and along with other grocery stores provides seasonal items like Easter candy and pumpkin ice cream - after the season, she said.

Local pantries are going after the same donors. The Germantown pantry, for example, gets food once a week from Trader Joe's and The Fresh Market and regular contributions of pastries and coffee from Starbucks in Hingham, Quigley said.

The Dedham Food Pantry at the Dedham Plaza gets regular donations from Trader Joe's, Costco, Panera Bread, and Shaw's, as well as organic vegetables in season from a farm in Dover, financial help from Whole Foods, and pet food from Petco, according to pantry president Lindsay Barich. The nonprofit organization is holding its annual fund-raiser, the Dedham Harvest telethon, on Dec. 8.

Wellspring Multi-Service Center in Hull put the word out to local churches and temples that the food pantry is running low on groceries, said director Vinny Harte. The response has been heartening, he said, with one man arriving with a carload of food he'd bought himself - but more is needed.

"The demand has never been higher, and our supplies have never been lower, unfortunately," Harte said. He said about 250 people use the food pantry each week - about double the number from last year.

Christ Church Pantry is one of 31 Plymouth-area shelters that get free food from the Greater Plymouth Food Warehouse, which is run by the South Shore Community Action Council and relies completely on donations, according to manager Beth Thompson.

Demand is so high that the food is almost completely gone two weeks after it's delivered, said pantry manager Betsy Stengel. In August, for example, the pantry fed 513 people - an increase of 71 people from the month before, she said.

"We've seen a lot of people who have completely [used] all their other resources," she said.

Lynne Stent, manager of the Charity Guild food pantry in Brockton, tells a similar

story. “We are keeping up as best we can,” she said. “We are always, always looking for donations.”

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