

Food Bank report shows Rhode Islanders miss 34 million meals a year

By MEG FRASER

Generous Rhode Islanders are running as many food drives as ever. Commercial food retailers are chipping in what they can, and those wholesale donations have remained constant. Charitable organizations like Boy Scouts of America have maintained their commitment to fighting hunger in the Ocean State.

Still, tens of thousands of Rhode Islanders are going hungry.

"As a result of the severe economic recession and the slow economic recovery, food insecurity is at a record level in this state," said Andrew Schiff, chief executive officer of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, who Monday released the agency's annual Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island. "The demand keeps going up. We need more."

Over the last four years the number of people served at emergency food pantries has increased by 58 percent, which now translates to 60,000 people served each month. In Warwick, there are 13 member agencies of the Food Bank.

Emergency food sites struggle more and more as the month goes on. Schiff used a single mother of two children as an example. Giving her a minimum wage salary, the working mother earns \$15,000 a year – well below the poverty level. She pays the rent and utility bills at the beginning of the month, accessing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to put food on the table once her paycheck is nearly gone. The average beneficiary of SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, receives \$272

per month, a number that increased two years ago through the federal stimulus package. SNAP accounts for 42 percent of meals for low-income families in this state.

When that runs out for a family of three, food pantries can supplement with bags of donated food. But by the third week of the month, that mother has exhausted all of these resources and, oftentimes, begins to cut down on meal sizes or skip meals altogether, what Schiff referred to as "the meal gap."

The meal gap is a focus of the 2011 Report of Hunger, and describes how Rhode Islanders are missing 34 million meals over the course of a year. On average, food insecure individuals miss 15 meals each month.

Making up that difference, advocates say, will take political will. If SNAP saw a 10 percent increase in enrollment, as well as a 10 percent increase in support, the meal gap would be eliminated. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank is advocating for that increased support through the 2012 Farm Bill.

"The Food Bank's network is already at capacity and there are no new sources of donated food," Schiff said. "We need our supporters to stand up for government safety net programs."

Steven Costantino of the Department of Health and Human Services, a former state representative, says that government can be an important supporter of these programs, which he sees as a "bridge to employment."

"Government is a tremendous tool in recovering from this distress we've been in," Costantino said.

James Arena-DeRosa, re-

gional administrator for the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, sees that support at the national level under the Obama Administration. He said President Barack Obama, and especially First Lady Michelle Obama, have committed themselves to the fight against hunger and also for proper nutrition. Support is lacking, he said, in Congress.

"Ending hunger is a shared responsibility. We need more allies in the fight," he said. "Food banks, for the first time in their history, are turning people away."

Arena-DeRosa cited nationwide poverty and hunger statistics, including that 46 million Americans are living in poverty and one in six families are living in food insecure households.

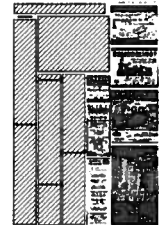
"No family, no social circle in America today, isn't experiencing challenges," he said.

What many people don't realize is that the demographics of those needing assistance have changed dramatically and, in many instances, are working poor.

"Many times, a United Way caller starts the call by saying, 'I used to be a United Way donor. Now, I need help,'" recalled Angelo Miccoli, vice president of the United Way 2-1-1 in Rhode Island. "The new population of callers to 2-1-1 are those who have considered themselves middle class."

Hazel Casanova of Connecting for Children and Families in Woonsocket said her agency has gone from serving 35 to 40 families per month to serving that much every week. Many of them are homeowners and are still working.

"The people on SNAP are



your neighbors. In many instances, it's us," he said. "Over half of all SNAP participants get back to work within eight months of joining the program."

Several Food Bank and SNAP beneficiaries were on hand Monday to talk about their own experiences.

"You never think about that until it happens," said Donna, a Food Bank beneficiary who faced hunger for the first time five years ago. She has volunteered for the agency ever since as a way to give back.

Lisa, another beneficiary, needed food assistance when she lost her job due to an illness 15 years ago. She found Social Security benefits were not enough to live on.

"Thank the Lord for the Food Bank and for the wonderful people who make it possible," she said. "They're always there for us. It makes a huge difference."

Aside from the working poor, many SNAP beneficiaries are seniors, people with disabilities and nearly half are children under the age of 18.

Underserved by SNAP and other assistance resources are the newly unemployed and underemployed, the elderly and the Latino community. These groups may not realize they are eligible or do not know how to access resources.

One way the coalition of service agencies are targeting those groups is through a new eligibility system. Costantino said that in the coming months, Rhode Islanders would be able to find out about SNAP eligibility at the same time they look into Medicare or other government programs.

United Way 2-1-1 helps to target the Latino population with their 24-hour hotline, which is available in 175 languages. SNAP, too, offers all of their printed materials in Spanish and other lan-

guages, has translators available, and promotes their service on Telemundo and other Spanish-speaking public forums.

"We're doing everything we can to make sure language isn't a barrier," Schiff said.

Additional recommendations made in the Status Report on Hunger are reaching out to eligible Rhode Island families to enroll them in SNAP, fully funding the WIC program, make WIC more user-friendly and less stigmatized by using EBT cards similar to those in the SNAP program, restore federal grants for emergency food and shelter programs and provide free school breakfast to all Title I schools.

How emergency food programs will fare this year remains to be seen, but Schiff reminded supporters this week that the face of hunger continues to change and is an epidemic affecting every community in the state.

"It is across the state and across the board," he said.

For more information on the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, visit www.rifoodbank.org.