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Improving economy not reaching Contra Costa and Solano county's hungry

By Jonathan Morales
Contra Costa Times

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The recession may be easing, but don't tell that to local nonprofits preparing to serve an ever-increasing number of hungry Contra Costa residents this Thanksgiving.

The economy continues to take a toll on food pantries and soup kitchens, where officials say demand is rising while, in some instances, donations are declining.

"The numbers (of those in need) are up dramatically and are continuing to grow," said Larry Sly, executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

The Food Bank is serving about 130,000 people each month, Sly said, up from about 98,000 two years ago.

Other charities are experiencing the same trend.

"Certainly the need has grown tremendously in the last two years -- tremendously," said Janet Bruce, vice president of the board of directors for the Richmond Emergency Food Pantry.

Nationwide, the number of households that went hungry at some point in 2009 was unchanged from

2008, but that is still at the highest level seen since the federal government began collecting data in 1995, according to a report released this month by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The number of households using food pantries rose 18 percent from 2008 to 2009, the report said.

Locally, one in six Contra Costa residents struggles with hunger, according to the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

The county's greatest need is in high-poverty areas, specifically the western and eastern ends of

Contra Costa County, and along Concord's Monument corridor. According to a March study by the Food Bank, 71 percent of households that turn to the Food Bank have incomes below the federal poverty level.

The high unemployment rate is also having an impact, as those who have recently lost jobs are increasingly turning to agencies like food banks for help.

"We have people coming to us needing shelter who were donors a year ago," said John Anderson, executive director of the Bay Area Rescue Mission in Richmond.

The phones have been ringing off the hook at the Antioch Salvation Army, as more East Contra Costa families are looking for food. Two weeks ago, the agency -- hoping to serve 150 families this holiday season -- only had received seven turkeys. Since then, the list of recipients has "swollen," said Maj. Jackie Smith, now in her 11th year directing the Antioch branch. The volume of donated food has increased, she said, but demand is up even more.

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Smith said.

Donation levels vary for each organization. Both financial support and food donations have grown over the past couple of years, said Sly, of the food bank. But Concord-based Loaves and Fishes Contra Costa is seeing the opposite, according to Clifford Seaholm, that organization's acting executive director.

"I think there is a lag time before people feel (the recession is) really over and ramp up their giving again," Seaholm said. "Historically, November and December are large months for individual giving, so we're cautiously optimistic that trend will continue."

On Tuesday morning, hundreds of Richmond residents shuffled up the steps of Southside Church of Christ to ask for help, then around the back corner to claim groceries, though hardly enough.

Everyone within earshot smirks at the mention of an economic recovery. South Richmond wasn't informed of the recovery, apparently.

While waiting for it, Regina Williams must feed a household of 10.

"Oh, you keep track of every meal, every day," said Williams, a Richmond resident now raising eight children and grandchildren. "You've got to know how much food you have, how much you will have left. That's just what you have to do."

Staff writers Paul Bugarino and Karl Fischer contributed to this story. Contact Jonathan Morales at 925-943-8048. Follow him at [Twitter.com/sosaysjonathan](https://twitter.com/sosaysjonathan).

By the numbers

1 in 6

Number of Contra Costa residents struggling with hunger.

14.7

Percent of U.S. households that went hungry at some point in 2009, representing more than 50 million people.

14

Percent of California households, on average, that went hungry in 2007-09, up more than 3 percent from 2004-06.

28

Percent of Contra Costa residents receiving food who are children.

35.7

Percent of clients surveyed by the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano who had to choose between buying food or paying their rent or mortgage.

Sources: Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, U.S. Department of Agriculture

How to help

Below is a list of some of the local organizations looking for donations of time, food or money:

- Bay Area Rescue Mission: 888-343-FOOD (3663) or www.bayarearescue.org.
- Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano: www.foodbankccs.org.
- Loaves and Fishes Contra Costa: 925-687-6760 or www.loavesfishesc.org.
- Livermore Community Thanksgiving Dinner: Volunteers, monetary and food donations are needed. Checks can be made payable to "The Livermore Community Thanksgiving Dinner" and dropped off at the US Bank at 2125

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Second St., Livermore. For details, go to www.lctd.org.

- Richmond Emergency Food Pantry: 510-235-9732.
- The Salvation Army -- Send monetary donations to: The Salvation Army-Delta Corps, holiday food baskets, P.O. Box 3317, Antioch, CA 94531, or www.salarmyantioch.org. Drop off food donations at 525 E. 18th St., Antioch. Maj. Jackie Smith, 925-525-0324, or jackie.smith@usw.salvationarmy.org.

Holiday meals

Meals will be served at the following locations:

Today

Oakley

- Mountain View Christian Center: 6 p.m., 5000 Amaryllis St., 925-625-9570
Pittsburg
- St. Vincent de Paul: 11 a.m.-12:45 p.m., 2210 Gladstone Drive. The meal will be served by the Pittsburg High basketball team.
Richmond
- New Gethsemane Church of God in Christ: 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 2100 Roosevelt Ave.
Thursday
Antioch
- Veterans Memorial Hall: 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m., 403 West 6th St., 925-516-0653. Sponsored by Golden Hills Community Church
- Grace Bible Fellowship: 11 a.m.-1 p.m., 913 Sunset Drive
Bay Point
- First African Methodist Episcopal Church: 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 2915 Willow Pass Road
Bethel Island
- Scout Hall: 10 a.m.-3 p.m., 3090 Ranch Lane, Bethel Island, 925-516-0653. Sponsored by Golden Hills Community Church

Brentwood

- Veterans Memorial Hall: 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m., 757 First St., 925-516-0653. Sponsored by Golden Hills Community Church
- Street Feast: 1-5 p.m., 1185 Second St., 925-727-9208 or brentwoodstreetfeast@yahoo.com
Concord
- First Lutheran Church: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m., 4000 Concord Blvd., 925-270-0913 (English) or 925-261-9315 (Spanish)
El Sobrante
- The Salvation Army: 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 4600 Appian Way, 510-262-0582
LIVERMORE
- Livermore Community Thanksgiving Dinner: 1-5 p.m., Bothwell Center, 2466 Eighth St., Livermore. For rides or home-delivered meals, call 925-455-9782.
Martinez
- First Baptist Church: 11 a.m.-12:45 p.m., 1802 Alhambra Ave. Served by St. Vincent de Paul.
Richmond
- GRIP Souper Center: 11 a.m.-1 p.m., 165 22nd Street
- Bay Area Rescue Mission: 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 200 MacDonald Ave.
Pittsburg
- First Baptist Church SonRise Cafe: 11 a.m.-1 p.m., social hall kitchen, 204 Odessa Ave., 925-473-2023
- St. Vincent de Paul: 11 a.m.-12:45 p.m., 2210 Gladstone Drive.

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