

## More people find they need help

Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, August 23, 2009



The first time Miriam Hernandez stood in a bread line, she was embarrassed and ashamed. The college-educated mother of three always thought she'd be the one helping those less fortunate.

But now, things are a little different.

"It's a blessing," she said recently, while loading three grocery bags of bread, peanut butter, canned beans and vegetables into her beat-up Jetta at a food give-away in Pittsburg. "We need the food. It's been very hard for us."

Bread lines are a little longer everywhere these days, but perhaps no more so than in eastern Contra Costa County, which has been battered by foreclosures and the collapse of the construction industry.

In Antioch, Pittsburg and Brentwood - towns only a year or so ago renowned for their new subdivisions and shopping centers - the number of people turning to the food bank is up 81 percent since this time last year. Elsewhere in the region, the number of clients has increased only 38 percent, said Lisa Sherrill, communications manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

"I've seen people with master's degrees come to us," she said. "People are losing their jobs, using up their savings and having trouble finding new jobs. Then they have to choose between food and utilities, food and medicine, food and car repairs. ... It's a snowball effect."

Hernandez has a degree in communications from a university near Mexico City. She and her husband emigrated to the United States five years ago with dreams of building a stable, middle-class life in the Bay Area, and until recently were well on that road.

Her husband was working six or seven days a week as a carpet installation assistant, earning enough to save for a house while Hernandez studied English and stayed home with their three children. The family lives in a \$1,000-a-month, two-bedroom apartment in Antioch.

Then, over the past year or so, her husband's hours dropped by half with the downturn in the building industry. To earn extra money, Hernandez now looks after a fourth child, and a month or so ago started accepting free groceries from the food bank.

This is not what she envisioned when she moved here.

An advertisement for English Country Pine &amp; Design. The top half shows a kitchen with wooden cabinets and a tiled backsplash. The bottom half is a green box with white text: "ENGLISH COUNTRY PINE &amp; DESIGN", "WWW.ENGLISHCOUNTRYPINE.COM", "By Appointment Only", "415 - 382 - 1952", and "57 Hamilton Drive, Suite N, Novato 94949".

"I hoped for a lot of things: a job, good schools for my kids, a house someday," she said, as she cradled the 11-month-old baby she's caring for. "I still think we will get there, but this has been very hard."

Hernandez had plenty of company at the food give-away at the Solomon Temple Baptist Church. In less than two hours, volunteers gave away nearly 400 bags of food, double the number they distributed a year ago.

The amount of food given away has been increasing about 20 percent a month, although the last month or two the numbers have leveled off, said longtime food bank volunteer Ellis Goldberg.

"But we do run out of things," he said. "It seems like there's always more demand."

At the Pittsburg church, the line snaked from a check-in table to the rear of a truck, where volunteers handed over grocery sacks of varying size, depending on the number of children in the family. Kids squealed and chased each other around the parking lot, but otherwise few people spoke or even looked at each other.

Alma Cortez, a single mother of two from Pittsburg, was especially somber as she waited patiently for the line to move.

Cortez had worked as a waitress at Hickory Pit in Brentwood until it closed a few months ago following a steep drop-off in business. She's applied for more than 20 jobs, with no luck.

"People just aren't eating out any more," she said. "There's no jobs out there."

She turned to the food bank when she ran out of savings to support herself and her children, ages 10 and 2.

"We used to be OK," she said. "I never thought this was going to happen to me. But it did."

Overall, the food bank served more than 100,000 people last year, up from 82,000 two years ago. The number of children receiving food has jumped by 45 percent, Sherrill said.

Food bank officials expect the numbers to rise again, as the effects of state cutbacks begin trickling down.

"So far, donations are keeping up with demand," Sherrill said. "But definitely, we expect to see more and more people coming to us."

E-mail Carolyn Jones at [carolynjones@sfgate.com](mailto:carolynjones@sfgate.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/08/23/MN0518LAKO.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 15** of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2009 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)