

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Alameda County: Number relying on food bank grows

By Samantha Clark

Oakland Tribune Correspondent

POSTED: 08/18/2014 07:44:05 PM PDT

OAKLAND -- One in five Alameda County residents relies on food bank assistance, which is more than the one in seven nationally, according to a new survey released Monday by Feeding America, a network of food banks.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties serves 250,000 people every month, or one in 10 residents of both counties. That's an increase of 21 percent in the last four years since the last study was done.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties serve 188,000 people each month and that number has increased by 26 percent in the past two years, due to an increase in programs and people struggling from the recession, said Lisa Sherrill, spokeswoman for the food bank. She said the food bank is still crunching its data.

The survey, conducted in 2012 and 2013, states that 311,000 individuals receive food assistance monthly from the Alameda County Community Food Bank.

"The extent of what people are going through just to nourish themselves is really something that's unacceptable in our country, in our communities, in our neighborhoods," said Suzan Bateson, the food bank's director. "It's absolutely shocking."

To make ends meet, those surveyed said they eat expired food, buy the cheapest food despite its poor nutritional value and even water down food and drinks to make them last a little longer.

They have to make difficult choices, deciding whether to eat or pay for the lights to stay on. More than half in all three counties chose between food and medical bills in the past year. In Alameda County, the divide between the haves and the have-nots keeps widening, said Allison Pratt, director of policy and services.

According to the study, the number of county residents relying on the food bank rose from one in six in 2010.

Sixty-six percent of client household incomes fall at or below the federal poverty level and 42 percent make \$10,000 or less annually.

The high living cost of Alameda County, 32 percent higher than the national average, amplifies the effects of the low wages. The \$15 billion in safety-net cuts in the Health and Human Services budgets during the recession have also taken a toll.

"All of that combined, it's kind of a perfect storm," Pratt said.

Working families that make too much to qualify for food stamps and other assistance or families that think they do not qualify often feel helpless.

In Santa Clara and San Mateo counties not only unemployment but underemployment and low wages drive the need for food assistance. Eighty-four of Second Harvest's client households have an annual income of \$20,000 or less. The annual income of \$82,000 for a family does not leave much for food after bills and rising living expenses in Silicon Valley.

The Alameda County Community Food Bank's help line (1-800-870-3663 and 510-635-3663) has been ringing with more and more calls from working people.

"They call at 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock and Saturdays when they're off. They're very hungry," said Food Bank help line volunteer Lola Smith. "It's an entry way for people with no more food left at home."

The Alameda County Community Food Bank has transformed drastically over recent years, expanding from providing help at the end of the month when food and funds have run out.

"Now families are really relying on us. It has changed our notion of what we need to be," Bateson said. "A decade ago, we were a purveyor of dry foods and packaged goods."

The bank moved barely a million pounds of produce in 2004, Bateson said. Ten years later, it distributes 16 million pounds of produce.

The survey helps guide food banks in making changes to better serve their respective communities by providing data and program blueprints from other food banks.

The Alameda County Community Food Bank is planning to distribute 90 million meals, one meal every day for each needy county resident, annually by 2018.

"The plan is both our commitment in ending hunger and it's a call to action," Pratt said.

"What it really articulates is our realization that hunger is a solvable problem and it's not something we can solve on our own as a food bank."