

# SFGate

## Bay Area food banks need help ahead of holiday

Kevin Fagan

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Workers serve food at St. Anthony Dining Room in San Francisco, one of the area's biggest meal providers. Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

**(11-20) 20:01 PST SAN FRANCISCO** -- Blame it on this month's cut in food stamps. Or stubbornly lean times for the poor. Or Thanksgiving coming later in the month this year. They all boil down to this: Bay Area food banks and other charities that hope to lay out a traditional Thanksgiving feast for the poor next week are running well short of turkeys and other staples of a good holiday meal. And unless they get a heaping helping of last-minute luck and donations, there's going to be more grief than gobble this year for those struggling to get by.

As of Tuesday evening, the San Francisco and Marin Food Banks were short 800 turkeys. The [Alameda County Food Bank](#) still needed 4,000 turkeys, hams and chickens.

St. Anthony Dining Room in the Tenderloin, one of the biggest meal providers in the Bay Area, is ready to start its annual drive for 1,000 turkeys on Saturday - and, with needs spiking higher every day, organizers are nervous.

Every year brings a call for more donations, but this year seems different, charity managers said. And not in a good way.

### **Nerve-racking**

"Before this month, we'd go from serving 2,400 meals a day to about 2,600 around the end of the month, but now we hit that 2,600 mark right away," said [Karl Robillard](#), spokesman for St. Anthony's. "People are feeling the safety net start to erode. Pay is flat, rents are up, and even though we always trust that people will come through, it's more nerve-racking than ever." [Paul Ash](#), executive director of the San Francisco and Marin Food Banks, said that not only is his nonprofit short hundreds of turkeys, but also donations are running about \$1 million shy of where they should be this time of year.

"As we come out of the economic downturn, people are looking away from giving to food banks and more toward the arts, things like that," Ash said. "They kind of make the assumption that with the stock market being so high, and so much prosperity coming into San Francisco, that maybe people don't need as much as they used to. But it's just not true."

### **More poor**

U.S. census data show that while great wealth has accumulated at the top end of the economic scale in the past few years, the number of Americans living in poverty rose from 13 percent in 2008 to 15 percent in 2012.

The [Public Policy Institute of California](#), using locally tailored numbers, said that without government aid, the figure for poor people in California would be 30 percent overall and 39 percent for children.

Federal figures also show that 20 percent of the nation's children go hungry every night, and in San Francisco the total is 25 percent, according to a city Food Security Task Force report due Thursday.

Those numbers are likely to rise because of this month's cuts in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps. Monthly benefits dropped by as much as \$36 for a family of four. That may not seem like much to some, but it's huge for anyone scraping by on minimum wage or welfare, said [Mike Altfest](#), spokesman for the Alameda County Food Bank.

### **Worse this year**

"That cut in food stamps means missed meals, as simple as that," Altfest said. "People's benefits typically run out every month after about three weeks, but this year is much worse and we are seeing it right now."

He said that in November last year, his nonprofit had received 18 emergency calls for food help by this time of the month from people whose food stamps have run out. So far this month, it has received 51.

"And those are just the ones we are hearing from," Altfest said. "The fact that the volume has nearly tripled is extremely telling. We knew these food stamp cuts were coming at a bad time, but this is validation."

Waiting in line at the food bank giveaway at St. [Francis Lutheran Church](#) on Church Street in San Francisco, 58-year-old [Calvin Cole](#) glumly totaled up his prospects Tuesday for next week's holiday meal.

"They used to have the [Salvation Army](#) come in and serve us a meal, but that ended a while ago," said the resident of the Graystone Hotel supportive housing complex near Union Square. "I'm going to stay at home and listen to some music and be glad I'm alive.

"Not much else I can do. These are very hard times."

## Looking forward

For [Anthony Alfone](#), 47, and his family of four, the holiday looks a little brighter - if St. Anthony's manages to snare enough turkeys.

"We'll be back here on Thanksgiving and feel blessed to have the meal," Alfone said, taking in lunch with his wife and 2-year-old son. "We're in a shelter saving money right now to be able to move out, so we can't afford a holiday meal on our own. But this is a great place, and I'm sure they'll come up with something."

His son, Zeus, took in a forkful of curry chicken and laughed.

"For us, it's really about family and being grateful for what you have," Alfone said. "That's all you really need for the holiday."

He smiled at his son.

"But it does help to have turkey," Alfone said, patting the boy on the head.

## How to help

Among those accepting donations for Thanksgiving meals:

-- San Francisco and Marin Food Banks: 900 Pennsylvania Ave., San Francisco. Call (415) 282-1907 for hours.

-- Alameda County Food Bank: 7900 Edgewater Drive, Oakland. Call (510) 635-3663 for hours.

-- St. Anthony Dining Room: Turkey drive begins Saturday, 150 Golden Gate Ave., San Francisco. Call (415) 241-2600 for hours.

-- Glide Memorial [United Methodist Church](#), 330 Ellis St., San Francisco. Call (415) 674-6000 for hours.

-- Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, 4010 Nelson Ave., Concord. Call (925) 676-7543 for hours.

-- Second [Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo](#) counties: Call (866) 234-3663 or e-mail [donor.relations@shfb.org](mailto:donor.relations@shfb.org) for locations and hours.

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