

More in need, less food at MANNA

Economy, efficiency cut pantry supply

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ASHEVILLE – With just a week left until Christmas, charities are finding more need and fewer resources. Particularly hard-hit are food pantries.

“It's been dire for a year,” said Josh Stack, spokesman for MANNA FoodBank.

Improved computer systems at grocery chains and food manufacturers and distributors means fewer overruns being donated to food banks.

“Their increased efficiency has been really hard on us,” Stack said. “We're not about to run out, but we have less and we're having to work a lot harder for what we do have.”

At MANNA, warehouse shelves are filled with pickles and energy drinks, pretty much useless commodities for a food bank.

“You get someone who can give you 10 palettes of protein, but you have to take 20 palettes of pickles or energy drinks,” Stack said.

Walking through the warehouse Wednesday afternoon, Stack pointed out empty spaces that should be filled with cases of food and stacks and stacks of pickles and soft drinks.

“We run out of things we used to have a lot of,” said Glenda Gragg, distribution manager for the food bank. “People ask us when we'll have something again and we don't know.”

MANNA is joining hundreds of other food banks across the country to advocate for a stimulus package that would increase food stamps and send more government food to food banks for distribution.

“We're trying to meet face-to-face with our legislators and advocate for help for people who are hurting in this economy,” Stack said. “The problem is on a scale in this country that nonprofits need government help to meet the need.”

Advocacy of this type is a tactic recommended by Joel Berg, the author and anti-hunger activist who was in town Tuesday to talk about ending hunger in America.

Berg called the current approach of expecting nonprofits to meet needs in the community “a return to the bucket brigades.”

“Entire communities turned out to fight a fire by handing buckets of water down the line,” Berg said. “It was satisfying work, it was hands-on, but it didn't work. Buildings burned down because it was only getting about 60 gallons of water onto the fire.”

Modern fire-fighting equipment, purchased with public money, operated by people with expertise who are paid with tax dollars, can pour 1,000 gallons of water onto a fire, Berg said.

“Which would you rather have if it were your house?” he asked.