

## **Cupboards are bare at Brooklyn pantry: Coney mission & others across city feel pinch as demand grows**

By RACHEL MONAHAN and JOYCE SHELBY

Tuesday, November 25th 2008, 4:00 AM



Maisel/News

Pastor Debbe Santiago, at Coney Island's Salt and Sea Mission, prays for donations in front of empty food pantry shelves.

Ten days before Thanksgiving in Coney Island, Debbe Santiago, pastor of the Salt and Sea Mission, sat in her cold, cramped office - crying.

Santiago had just turned away more than 80 hungry people because she had run out of food.

Anna, an immigrant and victim of domestic violence with four young children, came to the mission hoping to volunteer and get something - anything - for her kids to eat. She was turned away.

"When we don't have food," Santiago asked, "what does Anna tell her kids? I can't bear this. I was praying for a surprise delivery, but it didn't come. I don't think people know what it is to be hungry. If only everybody would help just a little bit."

Food prices are up. New York City's unemployment rate is up, and expected to go higher. Rents and utilities are up. And corporate contributions to charities are down.

Almost all New Yorkers are feeling the pinch - and poor New Yorkers are feeling a squeeze that grows tighter by the day.

A study to be released today by the New York City Coalition Against

Hunger found that 86% of the food pantries in Brooklyn were feeding more people this year than last.

Of those food providers responding to the coalition's questionnaire, 58% said the number of people needing food had increased "greatly."

"The situation is horrible," said Joel Berg, executive director of the coalition. "Brooklyn has the greatest raw number of poor people and hungry people in New York City."

Soup kitchen and pantry officials said they are seeing many new faces among their clients - people who wouldn't have been there just a year ago.

Here are some of the faces of hunger in Brooklyn:

**"This time last year, things were relatively okay"**

Luba Adams, 58, and her Coney Island neighbor Irina Ouchakova, 43, smile gracefully while describing themselves as scavengers.

"We walk around to find things that are re-ally cheap," said Adams, a retiree who recently

underwent hip surgery. She arrived early at Santiago's mission and got the last of the canned beans, soup and bread. "This time last year, things were relatively okay. Now, I can't work, and my daughter can't find anything."

Ouchakova added, "We go to 99-cent stores. We look for managers' specials. Things used to be much easier."

Ouchakova, whose husband is a truck driver, said the number of jobs he had gotten lately had dropped, while the family's rent had increased. "But where would we move?" she asked. "There's nowhere to go. It's like this everywhere."

### **"I go from place to place"**

In Ocean Hill last week, Larnise Smith, 31, and her husband, Christopher Lennon, 41, picked up food for their nine children at a pantry run by the Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger. The couple has not had a permanent home for three years.

The increasing need for food among Brook-lynites has made it harder and harder for the couple to find food as pantries have had to cut back. "Last year, we were doing okay. It changed gradually," said Smith, who added they used to visit pantries a couple times a month, but now turn to them three times a week, at least.

"I go from place to place," Smith said. "If there are two open on Wednesday, I go to two on Wednesday. If there are two on Saturday, I go to two on Saturday."

### **"It's painful for people to realize they have such a problem"**

Antoni Orluski, 71, went to a food pantry last month for the first time in his life.

While at the Greenpoint Reformed Church pantry and soup kitchen, Orluski, a retired bricklayer, explained, "I'm very poor. I don't have a lot of money. That's why I come here. It helps me."

The church's pastor, the Rev. Ann Kansfield, started a food pantry and soup kitchen a year ago, serving an area where the majority of hungry people are older.

"We had people showing up at the church door," she said. "It's painful for people to realize they have such a problem in Greenpoint."

With what he gets at the pantry, Orluski cooks himself

simple meals of bread and soup or oatmeal, toast and tea. He uses potatoes, turnips and apples to supplement his dishes.

### **"I'm just on a downslide"**

Things may be tough in New York, but Patrick McKinstry, a 36-year-old welder from Hartford, Conn., said things were even tougher there. He came to New York three weeks ago, looking on library computers for work.

"Right now, I'm hustling cans," McKinstry said. "I'm not here to live for free. I'm not robbing. I'm not using drugs. I'm just on a downslide. Hopefully, I'll get something soon. You can't lose faith in God or yourself. If you do, you're all done. I'm a survivor. I can't give up," he said.

Meanwhile, he's turning to soup kitchens and pantries for something to eat. And before the temperatures fell, he was sleeping in parks.

### **"We still have to show we care"**

When the food ran out at the Salt and Sea Mission last Tuesday, Santiago gave out the few scarves, hats and gloves she had.

Santiago started the Coney Island mission nearly 22 years ago, after being homeless herself for about three years.

"Pastor Debbe never lets us go away empty-handed," said

Charlie Rodriguez, 48, who used to visit the mission years ago, and returned again earlier this month.

"Usually at this time of year, we are packed with food," Santiago said. "This year, we are not, but we still have to in some way show people that we care."

### **YOUR HELP IS NEEDED**

The handwriting is on the wall, said Carlos Rodriguez, a vice president at the Food Bank for New York City. "The need for food has already gone up, and we've got to brace ourselves for more increases in need," said Rodriguez. "Private industry and community partners must help." Here's how you can help:

- **CITY HARVEST** is partnering with the Daily News in the 26th Readers Care to Feed the Hungry campaign. Between now and Jan. 9, you can drop off canned food at any city firehouse, police station, Modell's Sporting Goods store or The News' lobby at 450 W. 33rd St., near 10th Ave. To donate online, go to the Web site, [www.cityharvest.org](http://www.cityharvest.org)
- **THE FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY**, Hunts Point Co-op Market, 355 Food Center Drive, Bronx, N.Y., 10474. See the Web site, [www.foodbanknyc.org](http://www.foodbanknyc.org)
- **CITY MEALS ON WHEELS**, 355 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017. To donate online, visit [www.citymeals.org](http://www.citymeals.org)
- **THE NEW YORK CITY COALITION AGAINST HUNGER**, 16 Beaver St., Third Floor, New York, N.Y. 10004. To contribute online, go to [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org) n **GOD'S LOVE WE DELIVER**, 166 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10013, Attn: Development Department. The Web address is [www.godslovewedeliver.org](http://www.godslovewedeliver.org)

