

HUNGER PAINS

A PERFECT STORM OF DWINDLING FUNDS AND MORE MOUTHS TO FEED HITS MANHATTAN FOOD BANKS

By Dan Rivoli

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Inside the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, a woman is calling out numbers, once in English, again in Spanish. Jose Maldonado is waiting for his number. The Bronx man, a widower who cares for his three pre-teen children, was recently referred to the church in hopes that he can take part in the West Side Campaign Against Hunger, a co-op food bank based there that serves mostly Manhattan residents.

This is the first time that Maldonado has sought this kind of assistance. He is independently employed as a house painter and receives food stamps and city benefits for one child. But that is still not enough to provide for his family, considering the economic downturn, rising food prices and crippling medical bills—every Monday, a doctor gives him three injections in his back and shoulders for pain.

“Sometimes, I got no money for food,” Maldonado said.

In the past year, the number of people in need of food assistance has grown and their faces have changed. New patrons have jobs or high school diplomas and bachelor degrees, and many are visiting pantries for the first time.



Turtle Bay resident and pantry volunteer Evan Tatnall sorts cans.

Photo By: Andrew Schwartz

This is partly why food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the city are facing a perfect storm: high demand coupled with cuts to government spending. And so food assistance programs are restructuring operations and cutting services. For many providers, turning away those in need is not an option.

On a rainy Thursday afternoon, prospective clients for the West Side Campaign Against Hunger waited in a full room at the church, on West 86th Street and West End Avenue. Keith Kaiman, the development director, has taken note of the increasing number of clients coming in for interviews with the nonprofit's counselors.

"I've been here a year. For a Thursday this is very crowded," Kaiman said.

This past August, new clients had almost doubled—an 82 percent increase—compared to August 2007. The surge has been steady, Kaiman said. There are about 200 people a day coming in for help, compared to 130 a day last year.

"A food pantry is the only way to save money," said Jose Berroa-Saro, one of the campaign's four social service counselors.

Counselors take note of potential clients' living situations, in hopes of directing them to services better suited for their needs.

"Our motivation is that we don't want to see them again," Berroa-Saro said.

When the clients are accepted into the program, they are allowed to use the food pantry once a month. The pantry is a small space with visitors maneuvering around shelves with shopping carts. Rather than being handed a bag of food, clients are given the freedom to shop using a point system, somewhat like a supermarket. The campaign, which began in 1993, was the first customer co-op to use a supermarket-style pantry.

Across town, at the Yorkville Common Pantry on East 109th Street, staff braced last week for the flux of clients in need of a holiday meal or a food package. The pantry expects—and knows how to manage—a large crowd.

In the last several months, the pantry has experienced an 18 percent increase in visitors each week, a total of 1,700 patrons. Many of those new customers have been from East Harlem and the Isaacs/Holmes houses on East 93rd Street and First Avenue.

"We're seeing a lot more people from the area," said Daniel Reyes, director of programs. "Usually, it was a 50-50 split from people in the outer boroughs and people who live in the area. It's changed to 70-30 now."



Daniel Reyes, director of programs for the Yorkville Common Pantry, fears his organization will face funding cuts from the city.

Photo By: Andrew Schwartz

The pantry has filled the vacuum created by smaller pantries and soup kitchens that have been unable to meet the needs of hungry New Yorkers. Reyes said he's recently

noticed repeat customers at the 24-7 emergency food service, where people can come in and receive a bag of food, no questions asked. Since the emergency

service is not designed to continually assist customers, the staff expanded the regular pantry program, which allows clients to visit once a week. The qualifying zone, which previously covered East 75th to 125th streets between Park to Fifth avenues, now reaches up to 145th Street and over to the Hudson River.

“We’ve extended to three zip codes,” Reyes said. “That’s part of the rise in the numbers.”

Last week, a survey by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger found that more than 80 percent of Manhattan food pantries and soup kitchens have experienced a higher demand for food over the past 12 months, a trend seen throughout the city. Much like at the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and Yorkville Common Pantry, most new clients are immigrants, employed people or families with children.

Nearly 90 percent of respondents in the city reported an increase in clients; more than half of respondents said the number of people coming in for food has greatly increased. And almost three-quarters of these organizations said they are not distributing enough food to meet the demand.

To compensate, organizations are trying to improve their own efficiency. The campaign has staggered clients’ monthly visits to the pantry. Volunteers try to move clients out as quickly as possible by informing them of what is available and how many points they have. Wait time has been cut down by an hour.

About 90 percent of the goods distributed by the campaign, which also buys supplies through a food budget and accepts donations, come from the Food Bank for New York City, an independent nonprofit that distributes food to more than 1,000 programs citywide.

“Fortunately, we’re a large pantry so we have the capacity,” said Kaiman, the development director. “But we’ve been ordering so much food we’ve had to dip into the savings.”

The Yorkville Common Pantry recently received a well-timed, unprecedented bump in food donations from its base of schools, synagogues and the nonprofit City Harvest. That allowed the organization to provide food without dipping into the weekly food budget.

Still, the pantry has been forced to make food packages smaller and increase the food budget to \$11,000 from \$8,000. Because of cuts, the 24-7 emergency food service program is now open only 16 hours a day, from 8 a.m. to midnight. “At this point I’m hoping that we won’t have to cap the number [of clients] and tell them we can’t provide service,” said program director Reyes.

Although much is still up in the air, government support of food assistance programs is likely to contract as well. With revenue drying up, the city slashed agency spending last month in an effort to close a \$2.3 billion budget deficit projected for 2010. Council members have held hearings to propose areas that can be cut.

“I sat through three days of hearings. It was like going to a funeral,” said Council Member Gale Brewer.

She has been a supporter of the campaign, reserving \$7,000 in member item money for its English as Second Language classes next year. But that money is vulnerable to budget cuts.

“The cuts do hurt poor people,” Brewer said. “We’re still trying to negotiate with the mayor.”

Last year, Yorkville Common Pantry, with a total budget of \$550,000, received \$9,500 from Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito; this year, it is running without member item money. In the first half of fiscal year ’09, the city allocated nearly \$51,000 in food products to Yorkville.

“Money from the city is going to be very hard to come by for many groups that are providing an extremely important service,” said Council Member Dan Garodnick, whose district includes the Isaacs/Holmes projects. “Our goal in government is to try to take all creative steps to mitigate the impact.”

The pantry still gets money from the city: about \$20,000 worth of food products a year, including funding through the Emergency Food Assistance Program. But the real damage will be done by state cuts, according to Reyes. In August, Gov. David Paterson released a round of budget cuts to state agencies which slashed more than \$27 million from the Department of Health. That is trickling down to local programs like the pantry, which recently received a letter from the department’s Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program asking the organization to outline its own budget cuts.

“The state is so nice,” Reyes quipped.

At the federal level, spending for food stamps and food pantry programs comes through the farm appropriations bill. In response to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger’s survey, Sen. Charles Schumer called for an emergency plan to increase federal funding for food stamps programs, food banks and tax breaks for corporate and individual donors. But until the federal government implements this plan, places like Yorkville Common Pantry must make do with state and city money, as well as private donors, which decreased by \$150,000 this year. So Reyes is still bracing for the worst.

“We’re looking at at least \$200,000 of cuts in our budget,” he said. “But I’m still waiting for the downturn to hit.”