

NEWS & NOTES

Summer = food shortage

When the weather turns warm the cupboards get bare

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The end of the school year leaves many a Manchester child wondering where their next meal will come from.

Mark Burkush, director of food service for the Manchester school district, says 30 percent of the students in Manchester's public schools, receive free or subsidized meals. That breaks down to about 5,400 children who must look elsewhere for those meals — lunch and often breakfast — once school ends for the summer. And for many cash-strapped local families, the American tradition of three square meals a day is not a given.

So, during the summer months, these families look to local aid organizations to help fill the gap that is left when school ends.

"I've heard from child-care centers that serve low-income families that on Monday they see children come in and have four bowls of cereal," said Susan Howland, development director for New Horizons, a service organization that provides food, shelter and other basic services to help the needy in the greater Manchester area. "These children are starving after the weekend."

The NH Food Bank supplies food to 340 hunger relief organizations throughout the state — organizations as large as New Horizons and as small as a food pantry operated once a month out of a church basement. These are the kinds of organizations that families look to for supplemental food.

"[Parents] who might be too proud during the year to come to the food pantry will do it now for the children," Howland said.

This year, the Food Bank's inventory is "dangerously low" according to Erin Chamberlin, program services director for the NH Food Bank.



The increased demand for food subsidies coincides with what is traditionally a low in cyclical donations to food banks and food pantries.

"We always expect May to be a low time," Howland said. "People are cognizant of the needs of the homeless in winter and cold months; people are very giving. When you get to May the thinking shifts. Donations don't come in at the level we need."

In addition to this seasonal drop in donations, the NH Food Bank is feeling the effects of reduced food donations from grocery stores.

"Surpluses" supplied by grocery stores have been reduced in recent years as stores have become more efficient in tracking their inventory. Large grocery store chains have also turned to discount outlets such as "dollar stores" to sell their overages.

These surpluses have provided up to half of the food bank's inventory.

"We are in a tough position," Chamberlin said. "Dollar stores are able to buy the food and obviously the stores need to sell the food if they can, rather than donate it."

"We've approached the grocery stores," she said. "They understand this is a huge problem. They are turning more toward financial donations, which is great too."

With food donations decreasing, Chamberlin is looking to fundraising to keep the food bank's shelves stocked.

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For every dollar the food bank raises, they can provide four meals. This is possible because the food bank uses those dollars toward freight costs to buy surplus lots.

When a large corporation like Kellogg's or Proctor & Gamble has excess goods that they want to donate, they make an agreement with food banks or other food cooperatives that the food is free if the organizations can pay the freight.

But, with the price of gas increasing, the cost of acquiring those donations is rising, as well.

All these forces acting together are keeping food supplies low just as the need for assistance is rising.

"The typical profile of those seeking assistance is changing. More and more, it's people who are working," Chamberlin said. "They can't make that decision between rent or utilities and food. And they are having to pay medical bills instead of buying food."

Food pantries are now serving more and more families who are the working poor. According to NH Food Bank, 37 percent of those requesting emergency food are employed.

"The cost of living is going up and wages are not going up," Chamberlin said.

"It's pretty devastating to see the faces of the people at the food pantry these days with the rental rates in the city being what they are and the utility rates."

And more and more of those faces in the line are children.

"It's a real challenge to make ends meet. If we can give them a supplement for their food, it helps," said Howland.

National Hunger Day is June 5. Visit www.nhfoodbank.org to find out about local events to raise awareness and funds for local hunger relief organizations.