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Food pantries face growing demand
Many seeking help for the first time

DAVE HART, Staff Writer

HILLSBOROUGH -
HILLSBOROUGH -- Asked whether the recession has driven up demand for emergency food at the Orange Congregations in Mission pantry, the Rev. Sharon Freeland doesn't have to consult a log book to check the figures.

"Oh, my goodness, yes," she says. "Yes, yes, yes."

OCIM's Samaritan Relief Pantry in Hillsborough is the largest emergency food source in central and northern Orange County. Its counterpart in the southern part of the county is the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service, based in downtown Carrboro. Both pantries are among 22 Orange County partner agencies of the Food Bank of Eastern and Central North Carolina, which distributes food donations to them.

At both pantries, the flow of people coming through the doors has come to resemble a flood in recent months.

"Things are really hopping over here," said Chris Moran, executive director of IFC. "At our food pantry alone, our output has gone up by 99.5 percent since December 2007. We served an estimated 1,068 households then, and we've served 2,131 now. For so many people, we're the last place they can go."

Freeland, executive director of OCIM, said that organization has received requests for aid, mostly for food but also assistance in paying utilities and so on, from 141 new families in the first quarter of this year.

"That is a huge number for us," she said. "Just huge. We're just a little old agency up here, but we're doing the very best we can."

It's no secret what's driving the



Inter-Faith Council volunteers Justin Morgan of UNC, left, and Sally Smith, of Carrboro, check their red sheets to find the right kinds and amounts of foods to build up a food order from the IFC pantry shelves Thursday morning for waiting clients outside.

Staff Photos By Harry Lynch

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demand. Orange County, on average, is a relatively affluent area, but the 2006 census showed 13 percent of the county's population living in poverty -- and that was well before the current economic downturn. For those many residents who don't live near the top of the salary ladder the recession has hit hard. Job losses, pay cuts, decreased working hours, higher health care costs -- all factor into the equation that too often leaves families without the means to put food on their tables.

"It's a very scary time," Freeland said. "Most of our clients are working folks like you and I. But if you get laid off, what are you going to do? Hopefully we can help fill that gap."

OCIM, comprising nearly 50 church congregations in Orange County, accepts clients only by referral from member clergy or other agencies, mainly the county's Department of Social Services. The Samaritan Relief pantry can provide in a short-term crisis, but it doesn't have resources to provide permanent or long-term aid. So far OCIM has not had to turn anyone away for lack of supplies, but it hasn't always been easy.

"It changes day by day," Freeland said. "One day you'll look at the shelves and go, 'Oh, we're in good shape.' Next day you look and go, 'Whoa, where'd it all go?'"

Moran said the IFC is seeing more and more people coming in who have never needed help before.

"We're seeing much wider representative groups," he said. "There's a lot of unemployment, a lot of newly unemployed, especially among the Hispanic community. That's something I'd really like to see more community discussion about. We're seeing people who run their own businesses, home-based businesses, who just aren't doing well enough to make it right now."

If the steep rise in the need for emergency food and financial assistance is the grim face of the economic downturn for local food pantries, the steady and even increased level of donations and volunteer support are the flip side.

"Our donations are great," Moran said. "Our brother and sister congregations have done a wonderful job. In a time like this everybody thinks more about basic needs, and with funds from foundations dropping we depend more and more on private funding and donations. The community has been very generous. We just need to make sure that continues."

Freeland said individuals and groups have organized food drives large and small to generate donations.

"Corporations, businesses, individuals and a lot of schools are really helping us out," she said. "We're blessed with wonderful member congregations and a loving community. We

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holler, and they respond."

Both organizations have had good volunteer turnout, as well. OCIM runs the county's Meals on Wheels program, and Freeland said that not a single one of the program's approximately 150 volunteer drivers has had to step down due to financial pressures or gas prices. At the IFC, Moran said the volunteer base has been strong -- partly due to the economy.

"We've had quite a few newly unemployed people come in to volunteer," he said. "They know what it's like to lose a job, and they want to come in to serve other people like themselves."

ABOUT FEED THE NEED

The News & Observer's annual Feed the Need community service project is designed to raise awareness about hunger in our region and to raise money and support for the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

You can donate food at area Harris Teeter stores through Saturday or donate or volunteer online at www.feedtheneednc.com. This Saturday, Feed the Need Day, volunteers will sell special Feed the Need editions of the N&O at area Harris Teeters, Bojangles' and freestanding Starbucks, with 75 cents from each \$1 paper going to the Food Bank. To volunteer or for more information, see www.feedtheneednc.com.

EMERGENCY FOOD PANTRIES IN ORANGE COUNTY

- St. Joseph's Outreach Ministries, 510 W. Rosemary St., 929-1116
- Oasis of Love Care Center, Inc., 8005 Rogers Road, 967-8663

Carrboro

- Inter-Faith Council for Social Service, 110 W. Main St., 929-6380

Hillsborough

- **Abundant Life Church, 512 U.S. 70 E., 732-6460**
- Cedar Grove Mt. Zion AME, 5124 N.C. 86 N., 732-5450
- Orange Congregations in Mission, 300 Millstone Drive, 732-6194

Mebane

- Grace and Peace Tabernacle, 600 E. Washington St., 563-0873

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