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Food costs rise for charities

Relief agencies and their clients caught in the same economic undertow

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Food supplies at the Shepherd's Table are dwindling, but the soup kitchen's lunchtime line keeps growing. Douglas Richardson used to show up just 20 minutes before the downtown Raleigh food mission opened its door for lunch each day. Dawdle that long now before arriving, the homeless construction worker noted Wednesday, and you risk standing a couple hundred deep waiting your turn to file inside.

Tuesday's lunch hour brought in a record 343 people to the Shepherd's Table's Hillsborough Street location. Wednesday's light rain did not keep another 293 from lining up for a hot lunch.

"There's a lot of people out here ... maybe they had a job and are not homeless," said Richardson, 40. "But things are happening. They're losing their jobs."

Food banks and pantries across the Triangle, North Carolina and the nation are seeing a similar surge in demand, as job layoffs increase, gas prices soar and food costs spike. Prices for almost every type of grocery have gone up in the past year -- many as much as 10 percent or 20 percent, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

U.S. Rep. Bob Etheridge, a Lillington Democrat, is scheduled to hold a news conference this afternoon at The Inter-Faith Food Shuttle in Raleigh to discuss the congressional farm bill, which proposes an extra \$10.36 billion in nutritional initiatives to help states stock food banks.

Gas trickles down

David Reese, the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle's chief operating officer for food recovery and distribution, said everyone is feeling the crunch. The shuttle distributes food to Shepherd's Table and more than 200 pantries across seven counties.

"A lot of people don't realize or don't take into account the dramatic effect that high fuel prices have, that trickle-down effect. ... It doesn't only affect the regular consumer who's driving to the store," Reese said. "It also affects the distributor, also affects the retailer and then the end result it affects us as a food-rescue organization."

Tammy Gregory, executive director of the Shepherd's Table, said the nonprofit is seeing more construction workers and day laborers.

"If they can eat for free, it saves them a couple gallons of gas," she said.

The Shepherd's Table bumped its annual food budget from \$25,000 to \$30,000 this fiscal year; basing its projections on an average 293 meals a day. Gregory said the organization is exceeding those figures this quarter and will have to increase the food budget to \$39,000.

The dessert tray of strawberry shortcake and pound cakes slathered with chocolate pudding went quickly Wednesday at the end of a line offering spaghetti, roast pork or chicken, along with vegetable soup poured out of large tea pitchers.

A flurry of brightly colored signs taped up inside the dining room remind people that a second trip through the line is not an option.



Tommy Lemieux eats lunch at the Shepherd's Table soup kitchen in Raleigh on Wednesday.

Staff Photos by Chris Seward

Gregory said the Shepherd's Table aims to maintain a three-week reserve in its pantry, but after Wednesday's lunch servings, it was down to a two-day supply.

"Financially it really straps us, and people don't get into the holiday gift-giving spirit until September," she said. "It's a scary situation."

At the end of its serving line, Shepherd's Table keeps a small basket with some loose change and a reminder to those it serves.

"If EVERYONE who eats here could give .25c for this lunch. It will help," the handwritten sign reads. "Hard times are hurting us all!"

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