

Food programs feeling crunched

By Matt Goad : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- Food banks across the state and nation are asking for help this fall as the economic conditions have increased the demand for their services while reducing surplus food they rely on.

Jen Newmeyer of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina in Raleigh said the 34 counties served by the food bank have seen a 20 percent to 30 percent increase in demand compared with this time last year.

Families living on minimum wage sometimes must make tough choices between paying a utility bill or buying food, Newmeyer said, which will really begin to hurt as temperatures drop this fall and winter. Others must choose between buying food or medicine.

"A lot of times, people don't realize that right in their own backyard there are people who are suffering from hunger," Newmeyer said.

At Christian Assembly Church in northern Durham, which has operated a food pantry for 20 years, demand is up 70 percent from this time last year, pastor Dub Karriker said. And donations are down as people -- and grocery stores, which sometimes donate surpluses -- tighten their budgets.

Until this year, Karriker said, the record number of families assisted in one day was the week before Thanksgiving last year, when 110 showed up. This year, 127 families showed up in the second week of August.

"That scares us for what's coming up," Karriker said.

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina has joined with more than 200 food banks across the nation to call attention to the growing need this month, planning activities in several cities as part of National Hunger Action Month. The biggest event will be the opening celebration Friday and Saturday at the Raleigh Convention Center.

In Durham, the One Durham Everybody Eats program is sponsoring a fundraiser from 1:30 to 6 p.m. Sunday at Hartman's Steakhouse/The Ark, 1703 E. Geer St., with organic food served. Visitors will choose their own portions and price the portions themselves.

Entrance is \$10, or \$5 per child.

More information is available in a video presentation at <http://www.youtube.com/1DurhamEverybodyEats>.

The Durham Rescue Mission has a publicity campaign planned that includes county commissioners and members of the City Council serving a meal at the Durham Rescue Mission.

In addition to problems from higher unemployment and people losing their homes to foreclosure, another recent challenge to food banks has been the high price of gas, Newmeyer said.

The food bank collects food at its central locations and distributes to smaller agencies, such as Karriker's church, across a 34-county area.

That means the food bank's 22-tractor-trailer fleet goes through a lot of gas covering a 19,000-square-mile area about the size of Switzerland, so gas prices hovering just under \$4 a gallon are one more factor putting the squeeze on food banks, and the hungry people they serve.

