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Food pantries in danger of running out of stock

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Next week, the Salvation Army will have to turn away families who come to their food pantry for emergency food bags.

With the economic downturn as a backdrop, donations of food and money at the downtown location are down.

What this means: The food pantry cupboards are nearly bare.

On Friday morning, all that was left was a couple of pallets of tuna and vienna sausage. There were 12-can packs of green beans, yams, pudding, ramen noodles and cereal. A few packets of Kool-Aid sat on the fruit shelf, the only representatives of that food group.

It's barely enough for 16 families to eat for three to four days. Right now, the pantry needs all kinds of non-perishable foods, and monetary donations to give families perishable essentials like milk, eggs and meats.

Army officials say the drop in donations reflects the economy.

"When people start hurting economically, they cut out their donations," said Major Butch Mallard, the corps officer at the Salvation Army Church and Shelter. "I've been in the Salvation Army for 20 years, and this is the first time in 12 years that I've seen anything like this."

The Salvation Army's Food Pantry supplies are intended to be a last resort available to families just once every three months. The purpose for the limit is so those families won't become dependent on charity, Mallard added.

But at the same time donations are shrinking, demand for emergency food is rising. In September, the Salvation Army Food Pantry had 287 food orders, and about 140 of those



Staff Photo By PAUL STEPHEN
Maj. Butch Mallard with the Salvation Army goes over the very short supply in their mostly empty food pantry Friday. With about one day's worth of canned goods on hand, they are in critical need of all forms of food to be able to continue handing out emergency food supplies to the needy.

were new people who had never requested food there before. Two years ago, the pantry was seeing 87 food orders per month.

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard on Fifth Street has also seen a rise in demand for emergency food. In September, that food pantry served 2,546 people, the highest number since the charity opened in 1987. (Families can only request food once a month there.) But Mother Hubbard's Cupboard is still getting enough donations from the public to meet its needs for now.

"We're seeing an increase in people coming in, but, to me, this is a very generous community and people have stepped up. The volunteers are having to work to keep up with having the place stocked," said Jane Spicer, the president of the pantry's board. "People who haven't been in years are coming back now in need of food. People are telling me: 'I'm so embarrassed I have to come in here for food. I used to give you food.' It's really heart-breaking."

Brunswick Family Assistance is feeling the pain of hard economic times, too. Demand for food is up 40 percent over last year while food contributions are down, said Director Joe Cannon. The Shallotte pantry, which used to be open five days a week, is now only open Tuesdays and Thursdays for three hours or until the food supply runs out, he added.

"There's a desperate need out there right now. People are suffering," he said.

He said there will be a food drive at the Waterford shopping plaza on Nov. 1 to benefit the county's new food pantry in Leland. He said there are also several drop boxes with lists of what they need.

But Bill Hogue, director of Southport-Oak Island Interchurch Fellowship's food pantry, said its donations are currently stable.

Normally, the Salvation Army would also buy food from The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina to supplement donations, but Mallard said even money for Food Bank supplies has run out.

On Friday, officials from Salvation Army and the Food Bank met to try to solve the problem.

"They're definitely not the only ones (food agencies and ministries) who are hurting, but we want to help the Salvation Army any way we can because we've partnered with them for years," said Tommy Taylor, regional development manager for the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina's Wilmington office.

Taylor said donations in many of their food drives this year including the Letter Carrier's National Food Drive were down. But the area has several food drives in coming months that will increase the supplies going to area food pantries.

But with the start of the Salvation Army's Thanksgiving and Christmas fund drives just two weeks away, the Army is worried more families will be going hungry this holiday season if

donation levels stay low.

Most of the food left in the Salvation Army's Food Pantry on Friday was given by Little Chapel on the Boardwalk in Wrightsville Beach. As part of the church's Food Basket ministry, Little Chapel gives a different food item each month to the Salvation Army's pantry.

"It's important the work that the Salvation Army does in this area. That has been something that Little Chapel has been involved with for many many years," said Brett Blizzard, ministry member. "It would be nice to see other churches and organizations in the community step up to help an organization that helps people in our community."

Staff writer Shelby Sebens contributed to this report.

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