

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2024

## FULTON COUNTY

# Feeding the hungry

### Increased food insecurity places demand on local food programs

BY GREG HITCHCOCK

Tom Bell is a team captain for St. John's Episcopal Church's NOAH (Needy or Alone and Hungry) program in Johnstown, where 13 teams alternate cooking and serving meals to the hungry every Sunday.

The program was started in 1991 to provide a hot meal on Sundays, a day when such meals were otherwise unavailable to the needy in Fulton County. It's a major resource for people trying to make ends meet, Bell said.

Despite challenges like COVID-19, the program has grown to serve about 500

meals monthly.

"Our first meal back in 1991 had only 11 people," Bell said.

"Toward the end of the month, where people are running out of money, the numbers go up, but on average, it's about 500 per month," he said.

Bell explained one of the main reasons for the increased demand is people have a very limited budget.

"When they're at the grocery store, if you look at the prices of fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, it's kind of expensive," he said. "So, they tend to look for the cheapest stuff they can get, which might be

a bag of frozen fish sticks or ramen noodles."

These challenges aren't unique to communities like Johnstown in Fulton County, of course.

Food insecurity, where some individuals and families struggle to obtain nutritious meals at an adequate level, is one of the biggest challenges across the United States, along with shortfalls in terms of adequate shelter and clothing.

Families who have difficulties buying adequate food also struggle to pay for housing, child care, health care and other basic needs.

The consumer price index for shelter rose 0.4% in October, accounting for over half of the monthly all items

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GREG HITCHCOCK

Tom Bell stands in the NOAH food pantry at One Church Street in Johnstown on Monday. In October, the pantry served 818 people from 279 households, a significant increase from previous months.

## Food

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increase. The food index also increased over the month, rising 0.2% as the food at home index increased 0.1% and the food away from home index rose 0.2%.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

In New York state alone, the total food cost based on WIC rose from \$237.9 million in 2019 to \$365.8 million in 2023, as reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The monthly WIC benefit increased from \$52.32 in 2019 to \$73.25 in 2023.

In April 2023, 41.9 million people in 22.2 million households received SNAP benefits. That translates to 12.5% of the total U.S. population, according to the Pew Research Center.

At the NOAH program, volunteers help to provide balanced, healthy dinners with real meat and vegetables that patrons wouldn't ordinarily be able to have on their budget.

"We have the availability of carry outs for those people who just can't get here for whatever reason," said Bell.

A member of the Regional Food Bank in Albany County, the NOAH program is able to get them food item giveaways to take home with them.

After the program outgrew the church's basement, St. John's purchased a three-story building at One Church Street that is handicap accessible which eventually will allow more people to come and sit at Sunday dinner. Currently, the space is used for a food pantry.

The NOAH program includes a food pantry and aims to expand with a "Food Is Medicine" initiative focusing on healthy eating, cooking classes, Bell said.

The food pantry, founded by the late Rev. Bill Small, operates on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon.

The pantry follows a choice system, offering a variety of food items, including meat, and serves residents from the 12095 zip code. The pantry also provides information on other services and recipes while visitors wait.

In October, the pantry served 818 people from 279 households, a significant increase from previous months.

"The NOAH meal program is known for its no-questions-asked policy, ensuring no one leaves hungry," Bell said.

Food insecurity among children warrants particular attention as it is linked to numerous adverse outcomes that can have lasting effects, including developmental disruptions, school problems and physical and mental health issues.

A report in Pediatrics, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, compared the rates of food secure and non-secured households. The findings revealed children in food-insecure households had rates of lifetime asthma diagnosis and depressive symptoms that were 19.1% and 27.9% higher, respectively, rates of foregone medical care that were 179.8% higher, and rates of emergency department use that were 25.9% higher.

Jane Parker has been the Mayfield Presbyterian Church food pantry manager for five years. The program provides three meals a week and, to date, 55 to 65 families come to Mayfield Presbyterian



GREG HITCHCOCK

Volunteers stir food at The Church of the Holy Spirit during Friday's Table in Gloversville last Friday.

an Church every other Tuesday from noon to 3 p.m.

Bags are preset with regular groceries like pasta, soups, peanut butter and cereal supplemented with fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs, yogurt and cheese.

"We're going to serve over 90 families in the Mayfield community for them to have a Thanksgiving meal," Parker said.

While the majority of the food is ordered through the Regional Food Bank, individual donors, businesses and community groups also

contribute, Parker said.

"The Boy Scouts recently did a food drive around town, and they brought all the food donations here, and helped sort that out with us and others," she said.

Parker said the church is building a new food pantry to accommodate more families. Funding for this project comes from a bequest from a church member.

"Our numbers increase annually," Parker said. "Every time we open our doors, which is 26 times a year, we'll add probably three to

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five families every month. So, from January to December, we'll see an increase of 15 to 20 new families a year."

Food insecurity has hit everyone.

The Raiders Relief Food Pantry, established in 2018, serves students, staff, and faculty at SUNY Fulton-Montgomery Community College. It addresses food insecurity by providing a variety of food items, including canned goods, fresh produce, meats, and hygiene products.

In October alone, the pantry recorded 902 visits, necessitating a limit on weekly food items per visitor.

"We noticed students were coming to campus, and many of them may have not had breakfast or a meal that was going to provide them the nutrition to concentrate in class," said Allison Snell, coordinator of student involvement.

"Students have it down pat now to where they know the schedule of the Regional Food Bank and the deliveries that are on Fridays, so we'll have a line out the door for it," Snell said.

The pantry operates with work-study students, interns, and volunteers.

Initially serving 10 to 25 people, Friday's Table at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Gloversville has grown to 125 meals weekly, relying solely on donations. The program shifted to take-out during COVID-19, reducing volunteer teams from 12 to 9. Despite challenges, including rising food costs and decreased volunteer numbers, the program continues to thrive, according to Friday's Table organizer Pamela Bray.

"There's so many more homeless people and people that are in need, that we never know how many people to prepare for," Bray said.

"We try to survive on what we have, and it's hard to fill that pantry," she said.

Without the generous support from the community in food and cash donations, including one year when a donor contributed \$1,000 just before Christmas, Bray said Friday's Table would be hard-pressed to continue.

"The cost of food has been raised so much. I bargain everywhere, and the prices have escalated so high, it's been unbelievable," Bray said.