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OPINION

Column: Aurora area pantries concerned about running low on food

By Denise Crosby
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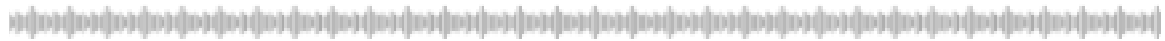




The nearly empty storage shelves in the back room at Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry paint a picture of the food shortage many local pantries are facing. (Interfaith Food Pantry / HANDOUT)



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Storage shelves once brimming with food are half empty.

And with need rising – Aurora’s largest pantry is serving 35% more people this year, including 40 new families a week – “we are receiving fewer donations,” noted spokesperson Alyssa Edwards.

Which means, she added, because “we are giving out more than we are getting in, our food is getting scarce.”

Those concerns are echoed by Diane Renner, executive director of Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry in Aurora, who acknowledges that, as rough as it has been navigating the pandemic, add inflation and a perfect storm is brewing.

“A crisis could be looming, especially as winter approaches,” said Renner. “While we are not seeing our shelves empty as fast as others, we are gearing up to see it happen ... we know what the problem is.”

So does Loaves & Fishes CEO Mike Havala, whose Naperville-based pantry has seen its numbers skyrocket from 3,000 clients at the beginning of 2022 to its current 6,000.

That’s because inflation disproportionately affects the one-in-five people who are considered low income of the 2.2 million people in the four-county area Loaves & Fishes serves, he told me.

Because the poor can’t do anything about fixed living costs, such as housing, utilities, transportation or child care, “they will reduce costs where they can,” Havala said. And the first place that’s cut is food.

“While we might see 8-9% overall inflation, it hits groceries at 13-14%,” he pointed out. And that’s “a double whammy” for those who are already struggling.

Making matters worse, donations are down considerably - as is volunteerism - because inflation is emptying everyone’s wallets. And even those food rescue programs that local pantries rely on to fill shelves are not producing the volume of surplus as before.

Plus, the Northern Illinois Food Bank that partners with these pantries is facing those same challenges – from high food costs to shipping issues – and has cut back dramatically on the items it can offer.

“The list we are receiving from the food bank is nowhere near what it used to be, even during COVID,” said Renner.

Food supplies have, indeed, been a challenge since the pandemic, said Maeven Sipes, chief philanthropy officer with Northern Illinois Food Bank. Not only does this nonprofit, which serves 13 counties, have to

order items earlier because of supply chain issues, it is spending more than twice the amount compared to


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The last couple of weeks, Sipes admitted, have been particularly challenging, with even those 25 items on the food bank's "core shopping list" dropping in availability.

All the hurdles these pantry leaders face undoubtedly require more creative thinking, including looking elsewhere for food sources, even from out of state. Unfortunately, inflation, which has affected everything from food to aluminum cans to transportation, means those sources want more money and larger quantities to make these deals worthwhile.

One company, Renner pointed out, had a minimum single-order purchase of four skids of food, with each costing \$2,500. While that is a discount price, "it still means we have to come up with \$10,000," she said.

Renner sees other challenges on the horizon, and not just because winter and exorbitant heating costs are coming.

"It's just a matter of time," she predicted, before the area is hit with an influx of immigrants - some of whom are already here from Venezuela, Nicaragua and Colombia - and "we need to be ready to help them."

Just as there are many factors creating these challenges, experts insist it will take a combination of efforts to navigate them, especially, as Havala points out, "we add insult to injury" and move into an official recession.

For one thing, it will require more networking among pantries, like sharing big orders from food sources to make these transactions more feasible. A small church pantry, for example, was recently inundated with 10 pallets of celery and carrots from a truck driver after a grocery chain refused the shipment. That group got in touch with Kendall County Food Pantry, according to new Executive Director Suzanne Stegeman, which in turn shared those vegetables with Aurora Area Interfaith, Marie Wilkinson and Loaves & Fishes.

"We all need to work together," she insisted.

Plus, "we need to be smarter when it comes to food choices," Renner added, noting that Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry has stopped purchasing syrup to go with pancakes or jelly to go with peanut butter.

Unfortunately "there is no one magic silver bullet" to weather these tough times, insisted Havala. "We need to continue to look for new food sources and work with the current relationships we have. We need to look for funding opportunities, and quite honestly, put the story out there, because once people understand the extent of the issue, then they will step up and help."

A good example of that can be seen in Kendall County, where a robust food drive competition between Oswego's two high schools is currently keeping shelves well stocked for the Kendall pantry's growing number of "neighbors," said Stegeman.

There are plenty of other opportunities to make a difference, of course, whether it's giving to the virtual food drive on the Loaves & Fishes website; donating the more traditional way, like with Aurora Area Interfaith's upcoming 15th annual Holiday Food Drive; volunteering your time or writing a check to Marie Wilkinson; or delivering a big box of chicken thighs to your church or neighborhood pantry.



Jill Orr, who runs Holy Angels Food Pantry, tells me the number of visitors who use this small but beloved parish program is on track to double - from 100 to 200 – in a year’s time. And she’s deeply concerned about the lack of available items on the shelves, noting that meat has been especially hard, if not impossible, to come by.

But unlike a church pantry in neighboring Will County, which had to close its doors on Saturday after running out of food, Orr insists “that is not going to happen to us,” especially after 50 years in operation.

“We may have to change our guidelines or reduce what we give out,” she said. “But we are not going anywhere.”

Every group I spoke with expressed a similar resolve. Yes, it will be challenging. For sure it will take hard work, creativity and a lot of partnerships.

Most of all, it will take that proverbial village to step up and help.

“We are not at the breaking point yet, but we are close,” said Edwards of Aurora Area Interfaith. “And we definitely need community support however we can. Even small amounts add up in a huge way.”

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