

Why suburban food pantries expect further stress



The shelves at the Schaumburg Township Food Pantry in Hoffman Estates have been more sparse than usual because of increased demand and fewer donations. Demand is expected to increase even more with the reduction of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to pre-pandemic levels. (*Courtesy of Katy Trent*)



Eric Peterson

Updated 1/27/2023 8:13 PM

Illinois' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits will return to their pre-pandemic levels in March, creating further stress for suburban food pantries that have seen skyrocketing demand due to inflation.

Inflation also has caused a decline in donations, said Diana Nelson, director of welfare services for Schaumburg Township. Donations received during the holiday season, which normally see the food pantry through the first quarter of the new year, already have been exhausted, Nelson said.

Soliciting new donations is the only factor the township can control and will be the most likely source of relief during the coming crunch, she added.

"Our motto is we will never let anyone go hungry," Nelson said. "Hunger is not something we're going to just sit back and watch."

Since April 2020, SNAP recipients received both their monthly benefit and an emergency federal allotment triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The extra federal assistance will end March 1.

Depending on size and circumstances, a million Illinois households -- comprising 2 million people -- will lose to \$95 and \$250 per month when the reduction takes effect.

"We understand and recognize that many Illinois residents have counted on these additional emergency food benefits to secure healthy food for themselves and their families," Illinois Department of Human Services Secretary Grace B. Hou said in a statement. "We are working with our food pantry partners across the state to meet residents' needs during this adjustment period."

Though local food pantry operators said inflation is a more recent factor in their clients' financial stress, the difference is that COVID was declared an emergency while inflation hasn't been.

Last month, Schaumburg Township's pantry served 922 households, a 28% increase from a year earlier.

Naperville and Aurora-based Loaves & Fishes served 2,000 households comprising about 7,000 individuals last week -- double the number from last January, Executive Vice President of Programs Janet Derrick said.

While an expansion of its service area played a role, Derrick added that inflation has been the leading factor. Before the pandemic, the agency was serving about 800 families.

While Loaves & Fishes hasn't experienced a dramatic downturn in donations, simply sourcing some food items has become increasingly difficult. Topping the list are eggs, cereal and some types of meat, Derrick said.

Her pantry, too, is expecting increased demand when SNAP benefits go down in March.

"We're being creative," she said. "I think our household numbers will continue to climb. ... We're going to be over budget for what we have to purchase this year."

To prepare for the coming change, the state is recommending SNAP customers visit abe.illinois.gov (<https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/>) to update their accounts and ensure they receive the full benefits for which they're eligible.

Copyright © 2023 Paddock Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 280, Arlington Heights, IL 60006
Paddock Publications, Inc. is an Employee-Owned Company