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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**North Shore Food Pantries work on Smart Programming in Tight Times**

Food pantries and soup kitchens are seeing an enormous increase in people coming to them for food assistance. In 2008, Beverly Bootstraps Community Services supplied enough food for over 1,000 more visits than in 2007. Of their clients, 35% were new to the Food Pantry. The Open Door/Cape Ann Food Pantry in Gloucester reports similar increases, serving 1,472 households in 2008, up from 1,292 the previous year. Their pantry visits were up by 1,181 over 2007.

It is clear the need for food assistance is growing, so what are these organizations doing to meet the demand? The North Shore Hunger Network, a professional group of food pantry and soup kitchen leaders meets monthly to share ideas and trouble shoot issues. Recently, the group had a day-long workshop to address the most pertinent issues facing them in this tough economy.

“It is important for us to share our expertise and experience with each other,” explained Julie LaFontaine of the Open Door/Cape Ann Food Pantry. “In these tough times, it makes sense not to reinvent the wheel, but to adopt good practices that have been successful for another organization.” Kathy Kirlis, Food Pantry Manager at Beverly Bootstraps Community Services, Inc. enthused, “We serve quite a number of people everyday and our numbers are increasing. An opportunity to share resources, like a truck pick up at a food bank would mean we could provide food in a more cost effective way – and so could the other pantries that participate.”

Funders including the Forest Foundation, Project Bread, the Essex County Community Foundation and the North Shore United Way also attended. “We see this as a priority from a funding perspective,” said David Sullivan of the Forest Foundation. “Basic needs such as emergency food are what donors are concentrating on right now. As funders, we agree that an impact can be made by assisting the service providers and encouraging them to collaborate and maximize their resources or to jointly apply for funding.

After working together for the day, the N.S. Hunger Network reported some concrete results. The group mapped service areas in Essex County to review areas of coverage and to highlight communities that were lacking in emergency food. Members of the network discussed the most economical ways to acquire food and explored ways to collaboratively access food banks. A web site will be designed and will include an informational area to allow the group to more easily share excess food donations with each other. The network adopted the idea of a standard food measurement to more accurately report on food distributions. Conversations around nutrition allowed for idea sharing on this topic and a commitment to discuss this important issue at greater length in the future.

Melissa Dimond of The Food Project was hopeful, “As an organization committed to providing good, nutritious food to the people who need it most, The Food Project wants to collaborate closely with the NS Hunger Network. By meeting together and coordinating resources, all of us are better able to align our programs and make sure we’re doing the best we can do.”