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FEATURED

Rising food, fuel prices drive greater demand at food pantries

By Dustin Luca | Staff Writer

Mar 14, 2022



Warehouse Manager Fred Norton stacks a tray of canned black beans at the Salem Pantry warehouse in Salem.

Jaime Campos

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There's one place where seeing old faces return isn't a great sign: Food pantries. and right now, it's happening a lot.

Pantries are being squeezed by the one-two punch of the COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact and surging fuel prices sparked by the war in Ukraine.

"It's been interesting, because I've been paying attention to all the news articles around inflation and food prices, and those being at 30- or 40-year highs... I don't know what the current numbers are," said Robyn Burns, executive director of Salem Pantry. "Then obviously with the prices at the pump, that's a broader issue that's impacting people."

The impact of those two things is clear in March, according to Burns.

"At Salem State, our largest distribution, the past two weeks are the biggest days we've had there since the early stages of COVID. We're talking early spring, 2020," Burns said. "That really caught us off guard, because we weren't expecting such a bump."

At Haven from Hunger in Peabody, a usual decline in activity to begin each month didn't happen this time around, according to manager Kate Benashski.

"We tend to be lighter at the beginning of the months, and this month, that hasn't been the case... last month either," she said. "Everything's more expensive. Food is more expensive. So people are feeling the pinch, and they're using the pantry at times of the month when they historically may have given it a pass."

At The Open Door in Gloucester and Ipswich, the uptick is also mirroring the decline in the economy, said executive director Julie LaFontaine.

"March came in like a lion, maybe not with the weather, but we've had very heavy traffic at our two food pantries," LaFontaine said. "Very often, what's happening in the economy is reflected in the number of people needing to use our food pantries. We've seen an uptick in recent weeks of people we haven't seen in a while coming back, and some new faces."

The rapid spike in fuel costs has played a major role in that as well, and it's hitting the pantries just as hard as it is their clients. The costs related to food rescue efforts increase with the price of gas — especially as the need to obtain food simultaneously increases because of client demand.

"We're on the road more. We're on the road with our two refrigerated trucks," Benashski said. "Also, the cost for picking up at the food bank is something we have to consider too. We have to drive down to Boston, load up, and bring it back."

The pantries can always use more help. Cash donations give them the strongest possible buying power and impact, while food donations can extend what a pantry offers clients, and extra hands are always appreciated.

“With (COVID) case counts coming down, and the requests for food assistance going back up, it’s the perfect time for someone to volunteer,” LaFontaine said. “Right now, we do ask that people be vaccinated to volunteer.”

Partners also help in major ways, according to Burns. That includes supporters and neighbors looking out for each other where the pantries run food markets.

“We’ve been really growing our partnerships so when these things happen, we can work collaboratively,” Burns said. “We’re currently going to seven different housing locations, so there’s a lot of unique people there we can coordinate with at each location or organization.

“All of that goes such a long way,” she said, “whenever we start to see situations like this.”

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