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## Food banks look to fill shelves as holidays near

Food donations, especially from the federal government, are down and food banks say more and more families are in need of help.

By **COURTNEY PERKES**

The Orange County Register

Bags of leftover Halloween candy line the shelves of the Orange County Food Bank in Garden Grove. But one week before Thanksgiving, there's not a single donated turkey perched in the freezers.

Donations – from an array of sources – are at their lowest in 20 years and the nonprofit has issued a first-ever community alert asking for cash and food this month.

"I've never seen a holiday season as we're experiencing now," said Mark Lowry, director of the food bank, which is a program of Community Action Partnership. "I've got no meaningful supply of canned fruits or vegetables or meat or cereal or pasta. You can't make a Thanksgiving out of strawberries and potatoes and watermelon alone."

Cupboards are barer than usual at food banks and pantries across the state and Orange County, coinciding with higher local unemployment and rising supermarket prices.

The food bank's food supply is down 7 percent, or nearly a million pounds so far this year. The county's other major food bank, Second Harvest, is keeping pace with last year, but only by purchasing more food to make up for fewer donations. Most of the reductions have come from the federal government, but also from grocery stores and food manufacturers.


"Frankly, as hard as we work and as much as we do, we're still only reaching about half of the at-risk population in any given month in the county," said Joe Schoeningh, executive director of Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County. "We can do a lot more and we hate to see any slowdown."

But even as food supplies for the hungry

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shrink, demand grows.

In June, a UCLA report found that an estimated 190,000 adults in Orange County struggle to afford food, resulting in health problems, household stress and skipped meals. So-called "food insecurity" results from families choosing between food and other basic needs, including rent, medicine and transportation.

Pregnant women who don't eat enough are more likely to have low birth weight babies with complications, hungry children don't perform as well in school and malnutrition speeds the onset of disease in the elderly.

The report also dispels a myth: You can't tell who is hungry based on how someone looks. In fact, adults, especially women, with a shortage of quality, nutritious food are more likely to be overweight.

"The cheapest way to eat is to have an energy-dense diet," said researcher Gail Harrison, a public health professor at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. "Particularly if you're in a situation where you can't stock up and have to buy in small quantities, fast food is tempting because it's pretty cheap."

Laguna Niguel resident Becky Clouser, 29, learned to silence her hunger with the bare

minimum.

When her stomach growled, she ate Top Ramen and cereal. But in late October she was feeling hungrier and hungrier. A trip to a clinic told her she was pregnant. Eating a bowl of cereal as a main dish wouldn't cut it anymore.

So on a Friday morning earlier this month, Clouser walked into a food pantry, South County Outreach, with her boyfriend, Dustin Bruce, and her stepmother, Susan Throssel.

"I can't go around starving all day long," Clouser said, standing in the small waiting room in Lake Forest. "I'm tired of noodles."

They fill out paperwork asking for their address, Social Security numbers, photo identification and proof of household income. Bruce and Throssel work at McDonald's and barely scrape together enough for their \$1,900 two-bedroom apartment and Throssel's car insurance. Clouser is unemployed.

After a few minutes of forms, they venture into a warehouse. First stop, the bread pantry where a volunteer hands them plastic grocery store bags and paper sacks from Trader Joe's.

"If you can eat it, you can take it," explained

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Ed Ewart, executive director of the pantry.

As Throssel picks up a tray of Costco croissants, she turns to Clouser and Bruce with excitement in her voice.

"We can make egg sandwiches with these things. Oh my God, they're so good."

After the bread stop, they wait while volunteers assemble a standard 101 pounds of food that fill a grocery cart. Bananas, tomato juice, Total cereal, chicken noodle soup, macaroni and cheese, fresh asparagus, a pizza from Pizza Hut, day-old Halloween cupcakes from Ralphs. Food pantry policy allows them one trip a month for food and a second time for perishables like bread and milk.

Clouser examines their provisions as they load the car. She peeks into a plastic bag and pumps her fist in the air.

"Cheesecake. Yes!"

Others at the pantry are more pensive, and staff say some recipients feel ashamed of their need. One man, a former white-collar worker and father of two, won't give his name as he loads food into the back of his Nissan Xterra sport utility vehicle.

"Maybe when I have a job and feel better about myself. I'm too low," he said.

"I'm thankful someone's out there helping me in the dependent state I'm in."

Ewart said his pantry can't keep up, and it's not just minimum-wage workers who need help. Food prices in Southern California are up 3.3 percent over last year and Orange County unemployment rose to 4.2 percent in September, up from a year ago.

"We've seen people from the subprime mortgage industry that have lost jobs," Ewart said. "They may be driving a BMW but they haven't made the payment in three months."

At an Orange County Food Bank distribution in front of the Anaheim Marketplace swap meet last month, grandparents and young mothers stood in line to receive boxed commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The supplemental nutrition program included peanut butter, processed cheese, powdered milk and canned juice. Though weighing roughly 35 pounds, some lugged their box of food home on the bus.

But government assistance has been on a sharp decline. Surplus food purchased from farmers by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for food banks – including staples like rice, grain and vegetables – has fallen 40 percent over four years as farmers

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have commanded higher prices in the marketplace.

"It's a terrible irony that when farmers do better, people in need do worse," said Kim McCoy Wade, executive director of the California Association of Food Banks. "We need to ensure that people in need get the healthy food they need, not dependent on the swings in the ag sector."

Additionally, Schoeningh of Second Harvest said food manufacturers have become more efficient, resulting in fewer donations of damaged products or commercial flops like purple ketchup. And grocers that once gave away dented cans sell more of them to super discount chains like 99 Cents Store, Lowry said.

Food drives, while helpful, aren't the most efficient way to collect the mass quantities needed. The average food drive brings in 100 pounds of food but even the largest ones have collected less this year.

"So many of our traditional food sources have dried up," Lowry said. "We all count how many people we help; nobody counts the number of people we don't help."

Juan Tenorio, a retired warehouse worker, collects his food directly from the food bank's Garden Grove headquarters once a month. Workers carry the box to his

car, but back at his Stanton apartment he makes several trips to unload the food from his trunk.

The 73-year-old widower collects \$833 a month in Social Security. He pays \$300 in rent for his subsidized, low-income housing. He also pays for medications for diabetes and high blood pressure. He shops once a month at Food 4 Less, spending anywhere from \$30 to \$60.


"Sometimes I'm short on food. Most of the time, I manage. I can't afford to buy things that are too expensive and I don't get the best quality," Tenorio said.

By the end of the month, Tenorio said he often makes a large pot of rice and beans, eating only that for several days.


"That's a really good example of the kind of coping strategy that people use to manage food insecurity," said Harrison, the UCLA professor. "That may be eating fewer meals. That may be eating just one or two things or changing your household composition by sending a kid to live with grandma for a week.

"That's very characteristic of food insecurity in the United States. It's intermittent depending on the timing of income or benefits of one kind or the other."

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Tenorio tries not to worry.

"Sometimes I feel very pressured," Tenorio said. "What can I do? Sometimes I ask my kids to give me some money and they can't because they live so tight, too."

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