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Section: Front

'OUR PANTRIES ARE NOW EMPTY'  
FOOD DONATIONS: CHARITIES SAY MORTGAGE PROBLEMS, CLIMBING RENTS AND GAS  
PRICES ADD TO NEED FOR HELP

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Bay Area food banks have had a little less to be thankful for this year.

Although many of the local charities are seeing a record need for basic food items like peanut butter and pasta -- not to mention holiday hams and turkeys -- donations have been lagging. And food bank workers are nervous, with some calling this the worst season for hunger since the dot-com bust rocked the valley years ago.

"Our pantries are now empty," said Carol Patterson, a spokeswoman for CityTeam Ministries in San Jose, which serves food to the hungry year-round. The agency distributed some 4,000 Thanksgiving food boxes in Silicon Valley this week -- but had to dip into its savings to buy many of the meals. Not enough food was donated, she said.

"What we're seeing is because of foreclosures and high rent, our donors are going through some hardships themselves. We're seeing a lower amount of donated food," she said.

It's a similar story at the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. The organization, which feeds 163,000 Bay Area residents each month, was hoping to raise \$5 million and receive 1.9 million pounds of food from October to the start of the new year. To date, the agency is only about a quarter of the way to meeting that goal, and workers expect they'll actually need 10 percent more than initially expected to meet all the local need.

"We have a lot of people who don't know where their next meal is going to come from," spokeswoman Lynn Crocker said. "We realize that everybody who needs food is not getting it."

Michael Bute, a 47-year-old former printer and truck driver now living at InnVision's shelter on Montgomery Street, said the influx of needy residents could be blamed on too many folks counting on their homes for income.

"Everyone is depending on the real estate to be a big boom, and it's a big bust," said Bute, as he took a walk after a Thanksgiving meal at InnVision.

Others at InnVision, which provides shelter to several dozen men and women, said they've encountered more working poor these days.

Cornell, a guest of an InnVision resident Thursday who wanted only his first name printed, said he frequents a number of food pantries. He said he's meeting more people who are working but need free food because increases in rent and the cost of living have

outstripped raises at their low-wage jobs.

"It's either a place to stay or something to eat," he said.

Robert Lee, a 47-year-old with back and heart disabilities, said he's not surprised food banks are short of donations, saying government at all levels has been cutting back on funding for services such as shelters or grants for permanent housing, which he said he finally got after two years.

"The resources are gone," he said.

With just a month to go until Christmas and Kwanzaa, food collectors are wondering how happy the holidays ultimately will be for many of their down-and-out clients.

Indeed, according to data that was collected by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research in 2005, an estimated 1.1 million people in Santa Clara, San Mateo, Alameda and Santa Cruz counties don't know how they can put enough food on the table while also making ends meet. The group conducts its hunger audit every two years.

The Alameda County Community Food Bank has seen a 46 percent increase in needy families since last year. The agency got a record number of calls this week -- and they weren't simply from people in search of a free holiday turkey.

"It was, 'We need a box of cereal.' Or, 'We need food for our family just to feed them lunch and breakfast today,' " said Suzan Bateson, executive director. "We haven't seen a spike like this since the dot-com bomb."

In any given week, the Alameda County Community Food Bank serves 40,000 people -- and 14,000 of them are **↔children↔**, Bateson said.

Single mothers and their **↔children↔** tend to be disproportionately **↔hungry↔**, but even some families with two wage earners are struggling this year.

"We know that families are underemployed, people are not earning enough to make ends meet," Bateson said. "And when you have a spike in the cost of gasoline, that really affects the people we serve."

Food banks are in need of monetary donations -- every dollar given to Second Harvest can help provide two meals -- as well as basic food items. Canned soups, stew, chili and tuna are needed, as are canned fruits, vegetables, peanut butter, pasta, spaghetti sauce and low-sugar cereals like oatmeal.

But even if local residents get into the holiday spirit, giving enough to fill local tables this Christmas season, there's always January, when the need doesn't go away but the donations really begin to dwindle.

"The problem of hunger won't go away once the tinsel, trees, lights and decorations come down," Bateson said. "That's the most sobering thing for all of us to recognize."