

Local food pantries say demand is high, supplies are low

By Vincent Pierri | Daily Herald Staff Published: 9/10/2008 7:50 AM



Food supplies at the Open Arms Mission in Antioch, pictured, and other area food pantries are down. Officials say there's been a big increase in demand because of the sagging economy. Vincent Pierri | Staff Photographer

As traffic whizzed past, a group of people joined hands and prayed in a parking lot in front of Open Arms Mission in Antioch. About 60 men, women and children thanked God for the food they were about to receive.

The Rev. Scott Keenan, the mission's director, said that circle of needy folks has grown much wider in recent months.

Rattling off a list of causes, Keenan said the number of people showing up for food is one of the highest he's seen in his charity's eight-year history. "It's unemployment, pay cuts, gas prices, food prices, you name it," Keenan said. "All the bad news we've been hearing about the economy is hitting home."

Keenan said he sees an average of 30 new families each week. That's on top of the 250 families they normally serve.

And because of the increased demand for handouts, the shelves at Open Arms are almost empty by week's end. "This is definitely one of the toughest times we've gone through," he said.

The predicament at Open Arms mirrors the situation at other area food pantries.

Linda Blatnik, a social worker at Libertyville Township, said demand is up and supply is low. "We've had to cut back on the amount of food we give away," Blatnik said. "We're trying to be careful until Libertyville High School has their annual food drive in November."

The number of people showing up to the Grant Township food pantry is up sharply. "We've just about doubled the number of people who have been coming in," said Grant Township Supervisor Kay Starostovic. "We don't quite know what to expect in the coming months." Starostovic said letters appealing for donations will be going out soon to the community.

Tiffany King, of Warren Township, said nearly 100 more people are showing up each month compared to this time last year.

Food pantry officials say many people who would be donating money or food are struggling to pay bills too, and are reluctant to give, making the situation worse.

"These hard times are hitting all of us," Keenan said. "There's a trickle-down effect."