

497,016,141

3.67 estimated printed pages | use the edit tools to save paper and ink!

Hidden hunger: More neighbors than you think rely on pantries to fill the gaps

Written by Elizabeth Ganga

Jan 31

lohud.com



Dalysha and Luis Martinez, both 4, eat a sandwich prepared by his father, Jonathan Martinez, while watching cartoons at their home in Haverstraw Oct. 15. Martinez and his wife both work but they use the People to People pantry to get by. / Joe Larese/The Journal News

Making a difference

As part of the 22nd annual Make A Difference Day, this year on Oct. 27, Journal News employees and advertisers are taking action to address hunger. Our employees and their families are organizing food drives, volunteering at food banks, digging gardens that feed the hungry and participating in fundraising efforts that benefit dozens of hunger charities. We've invited our readers to donate groceries at Stop&Shop, our food-drive partner. To learn more about USA Weekend's Make A Difference Day, the nation's largest day of volunteering, and how to take part, go to makeadifferenceday.com.

They really know how to stretch a meal.

When there's not enough food, sometimes that's the only choice. You hear it again and again from people who have experienced hunger.

The stories touch every corner of the region, from the mom down to her last few dollars who adopted her Italian grandmother's trick of making a meal out of anything in the house, to the families who have lost their jobs and homes and whose children eat their principal meals at school, to the homeless men who turn to soup kitchens to fill empty stomachs.

Food stamps run out or the next check is yet to arrive, and they stretch what they have to make it through. Or sometimes, when it's bad, they don't eat at all. That's the story of hunger in one of the richest areas of the country.

"I hear stories of parents who just go without food so that their kids can eat, and sometimes older kids don't eat so their younger siblings can," said Ron VanWarmer, associate director of Food Bank of the Hudson Valley, which supplies food to pantries and soup kitchens in Rockland, Putnam and four other counties.

Hunger in the Lower Hudson Valley has long been a hidden problem. But with the economic slump, there has been an explosion in the need for food that has reached beyond the vulnerable populations in poor and immigrant communities and up into the middle class.

Feeding America, a national hunger charity that works with local food banks, estimates that in 2010 there were 136,000 people in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam — about 10 percent of the population — who didn't always know where their next meal would come from or who had to choose between food and medicine or rent. The number of people on food stamps in the three counties has skyrocketed since the 2008 recession.

"I just think that it's getting tougher," said Elizabeth McCorvey, executive director of Family Resource Center, a housing group with a small pantry in Peekskill. "We just had a Ph.D. that lost her job. We had a social services worker that lost her job. These are not the normal people who are coming."

People to People, Rockland's largest pantry, has served 200 to 500 families a month for most of its 40-year history. But in July 2009, it hit 1,000 families for the first time. Now it's reached 1,200 families a month, about 5,000 people.

"We never in a million years thought we would double and triple the number of people we serve," Executive Director Diane Serratore said.

Since Serratore joined the agency in 2008, she's seen a dramatic jump in the formerly financially stable, formerly middle-class clients coming through the doors. The recession has "really changed the face of what the poor look like," she said.

“One little thing, a medical problem, somebody loses their job, and their whole world falls apart,” Serratore said.

Eartha Lee Charley turned to the pantry at Eastchester Community Action Program three years ago when her beauty shop on Main Street in Tuckahoe flooded and the building was boarded up.

“It knocked me out of all my work,” said Charley, now 81. “I hate to even think about it. It upsets me when I think about it.”

Now living on Social Security, Charley walks to the pantry twice a month from her nearby senior apartment to pick up fresh fruit and vegetables and groceries.

A web of pantries and soup kitchens blankets the region, serving people in wealthy and poor areas. The Food Bank for Westchester distributed more than 6.6 million pounds of food in the year ending June 30 through 230 programs including pantries, soup kitchens and backpack distributions to schoolchildren that provide food over the weekend.

The Food Bank estimates more than 100,000 people in Westchester, more than 10 percent of the population, regularly turn to pantries and other food programs. But as many as 100,000 more may need help sometimes, said Jeanne Wilcox, a spokeswoman for the Food Bank, which was founded in 1988.

“A lot of it is working people who just can’t afford to buy food,” Wilcox said. People making \$10 an hour can’t make it in a county as expensive as Westchester, she said.

And increases in the cost of food are making it even more difficult to get by. The cost of groceries jumped 6.7 percent in the New York metropolitan region in 2008 and then jumped again by 4 percent in 2011, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the first half of 2012, grocery costs rose another 4 percent, well above overall inflation.

The Food Bank of the Hudson Valley in Cornwall-on-Hudson distributed about 10 million pounds of food last year to programs in its six counties. Rockland has 69 pantries, soup kitchens and emergency feeding programs such as shelters. An estimated 35,000 people in Rockland are food insecure, and 20,000 go to pantries and other programs, Feeding America said. Putnam has 16 pantries and other programs and 8,500 people who can’t take their next meal for granted.

Though some measures of hunger, like food stamps, have fluctuated with the economy, pantries and other community programs have seen nothing but increases in demand. The majority of food-insecure families in the region make too much to qualify for food stamps. The cutoff is 130 percent of the poverty line.

The big jump in demand began in 2008 when the economy took a dive, said VanWarmer of the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley, which is a branch of the Regional Food Bank. Forty new pantries have opened in the food bank’s six-county area in the past two years. In recent years, food programs have seen more seniors, more families and more people with jobs.

“People are really struggling,” said Judy Callahan, director of Putnam Community Action Program. “It’s been going on for a long time, too.”

Nationally, the number of people receiving food stamps, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, peaked at 27.5 million in 1994 and didn’t reach that level again until 2008. By 2011, 44.7 million Americans received food stamps. In July 2012, almost 78,000 people in Westchester, 44,000 in Rockland and about 2,400 in Putnam were enrolled in SNAP, more than doubling in Putnam and Rockland since June 2007 and up 93 percent in Westchester.

Sheree Harris of Peekskill hit hard times 20 years ago when she and her husband of 18 years split up and she had nowhere to go. She took her two teenage sons and moved into a Westhab shelter in Greenburgh.

“Eventually it worked out,” said Harris, now 56. “It was rough. It was really rough.”

Harris, who was originally from Ossining, was able to get transitional housing through the Family Resource Center of Peekskill and, after a couple of years, get her family back into stable housing. She’s always worked, she said, most recently as a cashier. But after a series of medical problems, she applied for federal disability benefits and now gets by on the payments and food stamps of about \$150 a month.

Food stamps, though a help, don’t last through the month. So she continues to rely on Family Resource Center’s pantry.

“This is a big help, it really is,” said Harris, who lives around the corner from the center and also volunteers there.

VanWarmer said the number of hungry people in the area is a shock to everyone he talks to.

“People have no idea,” he said. “It’s our little hidden secret that so many people cannot afford food.”

Serratore, on the other hand, said she thinks the idea that there’s hunger in the suburbs of New York is beginning to seep out. But there’s still work to do to convince people who haven’t experienced hunger that those asking for help are not “a bunch of moochers.” They’re people who live in your town. They’re Girl Scout leaders and retired teachers and former classmates.

“You may see somebody drive up here in a very nice car,” she said. “It may be the last thing they own.”

Pantry and food bank managers who are struggling with high demand and declining resources are hoping the job market improves soon and the jumps in the number of clients level off or even decline.

“I certainly hope we see a drop,” Serratore said. “We went into this thing thinking this was a crisis situation. But when a crisis is five years long, the crisis becomes the new normal.”