

CLOSER LOOK BUTLER COUNTY

Pantries see wide demand for food

Thousands in Butler use 'charitable food.'

"I don't think we'll ever see ... that pre-recession level," one official says.

By Michael D. Pitman, Wayne Baker and Rick McCrabb
Staff Writers

BUTLER COUNTY – Local food pantry operators say after years of increasing demand for their services – a product of the Great Recession – the level of need in area communities is beginning to level off.

Thousands of Butler County residents utilize the food pantries in the region, mostly to supplement their income, said Tina Osso, executive director of the Shared Harvest FoodBank in Fairfield. In the food bank's five-county service area, which includes Butler, Darke, Miami, Preble and Warren counties, around 12 million meals are missed in any given year, she said.

Before the recession hit in 2007, Shared Harvest had collected 2.5 million to 3.5 million pounds of food. Today, the food bank collects more than 7.4 million pounds of food annually and delivers every can and box to pantries in its region, Osso said.

Though there are signs the increased demand is leveling off – there's been single-digit demand over the last three fiscal quarters as opposed to double-digit increases – the current demand is the new normal.



Debbie Houston, a staff member of Shared Harvest FoodBank in Fairfield, inspects the date on a can of food Friday to determine if it can be sent out to a food pantry. MICHAEL D. PITMAN / STAFF

"I don't think we'll ever see, we'll ever go back down, to that pre-recession level because, although we're in a recovery, what we're seeing is the jobs that are being created are not paying a livable

wage," Osso said.

She said around 70 percent of those in line at food pantries have a job, though most work part time.

Pantries continued on A8

Pantries

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People must financially qualify for charitable food distribution, which is double the poverty level. A family of four earning a combined income of \$24,250 is at the poverty level, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. According to Policy Matters Ohio, there are several occupational groups based on median wage and annual pay that qualify for food service assistance. Those working in the food service industry, on average, are living below the poverty level.

"No longer is it true that if you work hard enough you'll be able to support yourself and your families. It really is the luck of the draw," she said.

More than 156,000 families were helped by 51 pantries Shared Harvest supports, which includes thousands of families in Butler County. But the typical family, or person, seeking the additional help is anything but typical.

"Hunger invaded neighborhoods where its face had not been seen before," Osso said of pantry clientele post-recession. "We had people living in half a million, quarter of a million-dollar houses who were standing in line at food pantries."

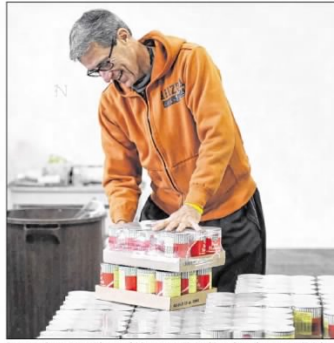
Many of those one-time high-income earners may be working again, but they aren't earning nearly as much as they once were, she said.

"Even though they may be able to make their mortgage payments, they may be able to pay their utilities, they're still depending on charitable food to help make ends meet," said Osso. "This is a world where only having ketchup and mustard in your refrigerator doesn't even warrant a comment anymore because that's the way you live your life, that's the way life is."

That includes parents skipping meals to ensure children have enough to eat.

"That's just part of the strategy to make ends meet," she said.

Fairfield Food Pantry served more than 8,000 people in 2014, the most served since the pantry opened in 1997 and nearly triple the number of those served in 2007.



Ron Schutte, a Shared Harvest FoodBank volunteer, Friday unwraps food that will be sorted and delivered to one of the food pantries the food bank supports in five counties.



Debbie Houston at Shared Harvest FoodBank in Fairfield places food in a box to be delivered to a food pantry.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL D. PITMAN / STAFF

Single-parent and fractured families often use the Fairfield pantry, and many of those households are led by single mothers, said Judy Dirksen, who co-founded the pantry with her husband, Howard.

Osso added that pantry patrons typically live in multi-generational households where parents with young children have moved in with their parents.

"More people are living in one household," she said.

Because the demand is so great, Dirksen said, this year the Fairfield pantry could equal its record-breaking number of people helped in 2014.

"Jobs are available but do not pay enough to house and feed a family," she said.

The Middletown Area Salvation Army food pantry served 5,200 Middletown households and 14,000 residents last year. Maj. Sebastian Leonard said demand remains high because of the number of low-income families living in the community and those with mental and drug issues. He

said the demand increases toward the end of every month, and the same clients are using the pantry on a more regular basis.

"It's a problem," Leonard said. "We are doing the best job possible and trying to be fair to everyone. It's complicated. We want to provide the best service possible."

Demand for services also is high at Middletown Family Service, said Maurice Maxwell, executive director. He estimated that the agency is serving about 5 percent more clients than last year. Most of their clients are in the 24- to 54-year-old category, who are chronically in poverty or working lower-paying jobs, he said.

The agency served 17,393 households and 36,791 individuals in 2014. Maxwell said individuals are permitted to receive food from the agency once every 30 days, and on average the agency served families five times last year.

Mike Samoviski, president of the board for Hamilton's Open Door Food Pantry, said last year was the pantry's busiest

LOCAL PANTRIES

Donate to any of the local food pantries in the region. For an online searchable database of food pantries, visit FoodPantries.org. Here is a partial list of some area food pantries:

■ Middletown Family Service:

Open from 9 to 11:30 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday, and 3 to 5:30 p.m. on Wednesday at 1311 Columbia Ave.

■ The Middletown Area Salvation Army:

9 to 11 a.m. and 1 to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday at 1914 First Ave.

■ Fairfield Food Pantry:

Noon to 3 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, 1085 Magie Ave.

■ Hamilton's Open Door Food Pantry:

9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, Thursday from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., and every third Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m., 800 S. Front St.

HOW TO HELP

The Journal News Shared Harvest Food Relief has raised \$2,272 during the kick-off week of the campaign.

Please visit www.journal-news.com/foodrelief to make an online contribution.

The food bank helps pantries in a five-county area, and every dollar donated helps provide seven meals.

■ Envelopes will be in the Journal-News in the following Sunday editions: Nov. 29, Dec. 13 and Dec. 20.

■ Visit www.Journal-News.com/FoodRelief for online giving.

■ Send a check payable to Shared Harvest/CFR to 5901 Dixie Highway, Fairfield, OH 45014-4207.

year in recent times. The pantry typically serves around 1,800 approved clients a month.

"Over the last couple of years, we have been very busy, especially with the downturn in the economy and people having lost employment," he said.

"This year things are pretty much at the same (2014) level. It has gone up over the last couple of years, and we now have over 2,000 clients on average each month."