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Aid agencies struggling with stagnant economy

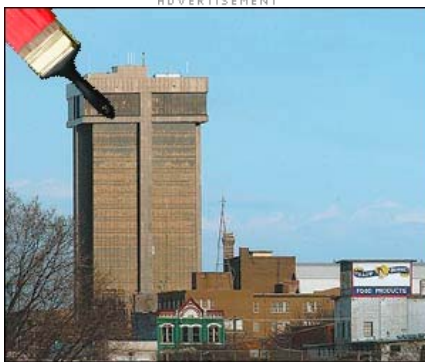
More people needing help as food costs increase.

LINDA LEICHT • NEWS-LEADER • MAY 4, 2008

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As Americans are struggling with rising prices and a stagnant economy, the organizations that reach out to the needy are facing the same pressures.



have moved in together.

In addition, the agencies are coping with their own rising costs and wondering how to operate on donations that haven't risen or may even have dipped.

getting donations

Depending on donations from community members who are facing the same high prices can put humanitarian agencies on edge. Many are seeing dollars drying up.

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agencies, has found more people willing to support its programs -- but with less money to give.

"We are facing the rising cost of everything -- except wages," said Pam Copling, director of Crosslines, an operating agency of the Council of Churches of the Ozarks.

Crosslines provides emergency assistance to individuals and families in need, and with rising costs, that need has been increasing.

The average number of families seeking help with food has risen by more than 33 percent over last year, and new families are coming in every day, Copling said.

Other aid agencies in Springfield have similar stories -- Ozarks Food Harvest reports an 11 percent increase in the number of people getting food at the pantries it serves. Grand Oak Baptist Mission had to expand its distribution days to meet increased need. And The Kitchen has opened its doors to more extended families who



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Carrying boxes of meals, Lynn Nitzschke, a volunteer homebound food driver for seniors, is on his way to load the food into his car Wednesday at the South Side Senior Center. (Steve J.P. Liang / News-Leader)

RISING PRICES

The Consumer Price Index for all food is forecast to increase 3.5-4.5 percent in 2008. The CPI for food increased 4.0 percent in 2007, the highest annual increase since 1990.
-- Source: USDA Economic Research Service



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Mike Doubledee loads potatoes into the mobile food pantry at Ozarks Food Harvest on Wednesday. (Amber ARnold / News-Leader)

"We are facing the rising cost of everything -- except wages." -- Pam Copling, director of Crosslines, an operating agency of the Council of Churches of the Ozarks

While the pantries are feeding 41,000 people each month, up 11 percent in the past two months, donations for this quarter have been flat.

Part of the reason is that food manufacturers have had less overage, which is typically donated to food banks, as the industry copes with rising production and distribution costs.

"They are not producing as much ... so they have less to give away," said Bart Brown, director of Ozarks Food Harvest.

The Council of Churches of the Ozarks, which operates an array of humanitarian service

So far this year, the number of gifts received have been up by 10 percent, said the Rev. Mark Struckhoff, director of advancement. But the total dollars was down 10 percent.

"We're seeing the trend," said Struckhoff. "Everyone is going through similar things."

Struckhoff said the organization does not see the economic situation as a crisis because donors continue to give.

"Giving is an act of worship, an act of faithfulness and a trust in God's faithfulness," he said.

Valerie Lorensen, food distribution manager at The Kitchen Inc., which provides a wide range of services to the needy, said faith is what keeps the agency going.

"When the cupboards get bare here, all we do is pray and God provides," she said.

But she has also seen costs and need rise as giving drops.

"It's been a bit of a struggle," Lorensen said. "Donations are down a bit."

But she is confident that the community will rally to support all the humanitarian services in the area.

"At times like this people in the community ... reach in and give a little bit more," she said.

John Sellers, associate director of development for Springfield-based Rainbow Network, is also convinced that donors will come through for agencies that respond to need. Rainbow provides a wide range of services to the poor in rural Nicaragua.

"An interesting thing about Americans, every year since the Great Depression charitable giving in the United States has gone up," he said. "Even after a recession, after Sept. 11, even when times are difficult, they realize that their giving is important."

For Rainbow Network, that giving is essential. The cost of food in Nicaragua has risen by 220 percent since October.

"Our focus is on feeding people who are starving to death, educating people who would not otherwise be able to go to school, healing people who otherwise would never see a doctor," Sellers said.

"In order for us ... to provide the same services to the same number of people ... we are going to need to raise 15 to 20 percent more money," Sellers said.

"What we have to do in today's economy is to find more creative ways to reach out to more people."

budget concerns

The cost of doing business, even the not-for-profit business of feeding the hungry, is cutting into limited budgets.

Getting and distributing the food is also getting more expensive for Ozarks Food Harvest. The annual budget for trucks and trucking carriers, as well as the agency's Mobile Food Pantry, is \$60,000. Based on fuel costs in February and March, that figure is going to top \$85,000 -- and the price at the pump keeps going up.

While the food bank struggles to keep its gas tanks and food shelves full, the same economic pressures are affecting families, making the need for additional Mobile Food Pantry deliveries imperative, Brown said.

So, instead of cutting back, the food bank has added two runs each month to rural areas.

"We're kind of operating on faith," he said.

The Southwest Office on Aging, which operates 40 senior centers in 17 counties in southwest Missouri, delivers about 3,288 meals a day and serves an average of 1,635 meals each day at its senior centers.

Director Dorothy Knolls recently spent two days in meetings talking about the rising cost of food, transportation and utilities that is challenging their budget.

"It is beating us to death," she said.

The South Side Senior Center in Springfield feeds about 100 senior citizens every weekday at the center, but in the past six months those numbers have dropped. Meals coordinator Judy Jenkins believes that drop is directly related to the cost of driving.

About 50 volunteer drivers deliver meals to the homebound each day, and they are facing the same pressure. Jenkins said that eight years ago only a handful of drivers requested mileage reimbursement to cover their fuel costs. Today, about 30 get reimbursed.

Last year, the Southwest Office on Aging spent \$179,000 to reimburse drivers at all of its 40 centers, said Knowles. This year, that amount has jumped to \$209,000.

"We're trying to find ways to keep the senior centers afloat," Jenkins said. "These next couple of months are dire. We've used up all our funds for the 40 centers."

"It's crunch time."

Crosslines' Copling is facing a similar situation. She expects to be operating in the red next month.

A program that helps people with gas to drive to a new job until their first paycheck comes in provides an example of the situation.

Because of rising gas prices, Copling had increased the budget this year, but it hasn't been enough. By April 9, she was out of money for this month.

"I try to be hopeful," she said. "Then I look at the newspaper and see that Willow Brook (Foods) is closing."



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Christy Johnson, a food service manager, serves food to senior citizens Wednesday at the South Side Senior Center. (Steve J.P. Liang / News-Leader)

AGENCIES

Agencies quoted in these articles are just a few of the organizations that provide assistance to the needy in Springfield. To learn more about the work they do, how to get help or how to donate or volunteer, below is contact information for each. Crosslines, 1710 E. Chestnut Expressway, 869-0563, www.crosslines.org
 Grand Oak Baptist Mission, 2854 W. Grand St., 869-4818
 Ozarks Food Harvest, 615 N. Glenstone, 865-3411, www.ozarksfoodharvest.org
 Rainbow Network, 3834 South Ave., 889-8088, www.rainbownetwork.org
 South Side Senior Center, 2215 S. Fremont, 890-1313
 Southwest Office on Aging, 1735 S. Fort Ave., 862-0762, 800-497-0822, www.swmoa.com
 The Kitchen Inc., 1630 N. Jefferson St., 837-1500, www.thekitcheninc.org
 United Way of the Ozarks, 320 N. Jefferson Ave., 863-7700, www.uwozarks.com

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united way

The United Way of the Ozarks depends on donations by employees and employers. The agency wrapped up its 2007 campaign with record-breaking pledges for more than \$3.67 million.

The 2008 economic downturn is cutting into that figure, said Jim Jura, chairman of the 2008 campaign.

Job cuts and plant closures, added to rising gas, food and other prices, are affecting the flow of money coming in through pledges and donations, Jura said.

The books will close on last year's campaign on June 1, when the final total will be available.

"We're sorting through that right now," Jura said.

Although the 23 area humanitarian agencies that receive funding from the United Way will get the money promised this year, they can expect less next year, he said. Also, other funding, including grants given to non-member agencies, are not likely this year.

The economic impact goes beyond actual economic conditions, which are better in Springfield than elsewhere, Jura added. Bad news about the economy can add to the dour mood.

"There is a public sentiment that causes people to reconsider their expenditures," he said. "They'll cut back on things over time, and their giving is something that will be included in that."

Facing those cutbacks will test organizations, Jura added, but he still expects the community to support local humanitarian efforts.

"Our people in the greater Ozarks are very giving."

in your voice

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