

Food banks struggle to meet demand for turkeys

By Tom Coombe | and Kelly-Anne Suarez Of The Morning Call

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Earlier this year, the people who run The Caring Place in Allentown noticed children in its after-school program loading up on the snacks they served.

They didn't need to snack. They needed to eat. So the organization started making dinners.

The downturn in the national economy has increased the demand on The Caring Place and other local charitable organizations. There's less food being donated and more people asking for it.

"We're on overload here," said Pam Kametz of the Northampton Area Food Bank. "There's a lot more people you wouldn't expect."

Evans Neidig needed help this year. A chronic work-related injury caused the 48-year-old Allentown man to leave his longtime factory job about six months ago, he said. Shortly after that, his 15-year marriage broke up. Now he lives in a small apartment and works three days a week at a gas station.

With his refrigerator empty, he sought the kind of help he hadn't needed in the past. Neidig was among the 450 who signed up for The Caring Place's Thanksgiving food basket program this year. The number is way up from last year's 130, said Director Mary Ann Griffin.

When Neidig arrived at the organization's office at Ninth and Hamilton streets Saturday afternoon, a basket with a turkey was waiting for him. He was lucky. The center's volunteers packed more than 200 boxes with canned goods, pasta, cake mixes and other items, but the 102 donated turkeys weren't enough to go around.

"I was very excited. I couldn't believe it happened," Neidig said. "It's going to put food in my stomach. I hope a lot more people come here."

The center can't handle more. Unless they get an extraordinary and unexpected amount of donations in the next month, its food bank will not be able to put together baskets for Christmas.

"I can't tell you how exhausted it is," Paula Gonzalez, The Caring Place's assistant executive director, said of the center's supply. "These are not luxuries that people are asking for. These are staples."

The Northampton Area Food Bank, which recently collected more than six tons of food thanks to local Boy Scouts, also is dealing with a heavy demand. It's had 400 new applicants since July.

Recently laid-off workers and senior citizens who have suddenly found themselves caring for grandchildren are among the new applicants, Kametz said.

The situation is much the same at food banks all over the region, said Ann McManus, program director for Second Harvest of the Lehigh Valley and Northeastern [Pennsylvania](#). The organization provides food to 180 food pantries in the region for a small fee.

"Many of our agencies are telling me every time they open they get two new families, three new families, five new families," McManus said.

At the same time, it's costing Second Harvest more to get food to these organizations. They buy in bulk, and in the last 15 months, have seen prices soar, mostly due to fuel costs, McManus said. The cost of pasta has gone up 73 percent. Rice has gone up 64 percent. Canned tuna, 58 percent. Peanut butter, 37 percent.

But fuel costs have gotten lower in the last few months, so the cost of food should be dropping too, right?

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" McManus said. "It hasn't happened yet."

The needs go beyond food.

"They're asking for coats and they're asking for blankets," Gonzalez said.

When people lose their jobs, they lose their health insurance, which means The Caring Place's health clinic has seen more visitors. And Gonzalez said that this year's annual school clothing drive saw a line stretching around the block, with so many people asking for school clothes for their children that what was normally a one-day event became two