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FOOD INSECURITY ON THE RISE

Economy, aid cuts leave growing number of Morris residents unsure where they'll get their next meal

By Lorraine Ash
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A good, healthy meal is easy to find in Morris County. But an affordable one? That's another story, as evidenced by increasing demand at food banks and soup kitchens here.

Take Keith Dudiak, for instance. Five nights a week, he eats dinner at Table of Hope, the newest soup kitchen in Morristown, located at Bethel AME Church.

One night last week he dove into Swedish meatballs, pasta, salad, a fresh slice of whole wheat bread and, for dessert, a cupcake.

"You do get a free meal and the atmosphere is so nice here. These people are really welcoming," Dudiak said. "Usually, you get seconds and we can sit down for two hours and watch TV. I got evicted recently because I can't keep up with the rent, so this helps."

His handyman business will start blooming again come April and May, he said. The soup kitchen, though, helped see him through a rough winter.

That's the way it is all over the area, according to those who run food banks, food pantries, meal programs and soup kitchens. More and more people are finding that after they pay their rent and utility bills, there's not much left for food.

Staggering numbers

In Morris County, 7.7 percent of the overall population, or 37,850 people, couldn't afford enough food to eat in 2011, according to the latest figures available from the Map the Meal Gap project.

Comparatively, the food insecurity rate, as it's called, in 2012 was 14 percent statewide, or 1.2 million people, according to Feeding America, the nation's largest anti-hunger nonprofit organization.

The Interfaith Food Pantry in Morris Plains, which serves Morris County, says it distributed 741,000 pounds of free food in 2012, compared to 893,154 pounds last year.

The number of residents in affluent municipalities using the pantry also is on the rise, according to the pantry's 2013 annual report. For instance, the number of Boonton residents using the pantry increased from 146 in 2012 to 179 last year. Other towns showed a similar uptick: The number of Denville residents increased from 95 to 121; Madison residents, from 69 to 90; Morris Plains residents, from 111 to 168; and Rockaway residents, from 170 to 209.

From crisis to chronic problem

Nowadays, the people using food pantries are the very same ones who ran fundraisers for those pantries in past

years, according to Carlos Rodriguez, facilitator for the New Jersey Federation of Food Banks.

"When food banks started 30 years ago, they were built on the premise of a crisis of hunger," Rodriguez said. "Years later, it's no longer a crisis. It's a chronic problem. In the past, people cycled in and out. A family may have made one or a couple of stops at a pantry and then got back up on its feet. Not now."

In Long Valley, for instance, the Food Pantry at Long Valley Presbyterian Church serves more than 90 families a month, up from 70 families last year, according to Susan Spina, volunteer and spokesperson.

"This is a fairly affluent township," Spina said. "Yet we have a lot of people who had been working full time who've had their hours cut to part time. We also have people who work a full-time job but just aren't able to make ends meet."

A few factors are leading to an increased reliance on food banks and food programs, according to Rodriguez. One is certainly the lingering effects of the recession. A second, particularly for residents in South Jersey, are the continued effects of superstorm Sandy.

The third factor is policy changes at

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LEARN MORE

- » Community FoodBank of New Jersey, Hillside, www.cfbnj.org
- » Community Soup Kitchen and Outreach Center, Morristown, www.cskmorristown.org
- » Feeding America, Chicago and Washington, D.C., www.feedingamerica.org
- » FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties, Neptune, www.foodbankmoc.org
- » Food Pantry at Long Valley Presbyterian Church, Washington Township, <http://bit.ly/1pC4Kpm>
- » Food Research and Action Center, Washington, D.C., <http://frac.org>
- » Interfaith Food Pantry, Morris Plains, www.mcifp.org
- » Morris County Midday Friendship Centers, www.morrishumanservices.org/adv/nutritionsites.asp
- » Morris County Nutrition Program, www.morrishumanservices.org/adv/nutrition.asp
- » New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition, www.njahc.org
- » Table of Hope, Morristown, www.bethelamemorristown.org

In pursuit of justice

Panel proposes sweeping changes to bail standard, policies for speedy trials

By Peggy Wright
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In the middle of last week, 28 percent of the inmates occupying cells at the Morris County Jail were there because they could not raise \$2,500 or less in cash to post bail.

Ten of the 53 inmates being held on cash bails between \$75 and \$2,500 on Tuesday have been at the lock-up in Morris Township since last year.

The fairness of detaining people accused of relatively minor crimes — in part illustrated by the low bails set on their charges — and potentially keeping them confined for months because they are too poor to post bail is the subject of a 120-page report released earlier this month by the Joint Committee on Criminal Justice.



Chief Justice Stuart Rabner

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner in June 2013 established the joint committee to concentrate on issues relating to bail and delays in bringing criminal cases to trial — the concept of a speedy trial. The 26-member committee, which included Morris County Superior Court Judge Thomas Manahan and a mix of prosecutors, defense lawyers, court staff and members of Gov. Chris Christie's administration, has proposed in its report dramatic and sweeping reforms to bail and trying criminal cases.

Some believe the proposals are pipe dreams that will require an exorbitant infusion of money into the criminal justice system, a sum for which no financial analysis has been undertaken. Others believe

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Breaking up may be hard to do for Port Authority

By Bob Jordan
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TRENTON — Gov. Chris Christie's critics say he is the last one who should oversee reforms at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey in the wake of the George Washington Bridge scandal that involved Christie's political associates.

But the embattled Republican governor insists he wants to take the lead on shaking up the bistate authority, possibly by splitting it into separate New Jersey and New York divisions so each state has primary responsibility for completing projects within its jurisdiction.

"I'm particularly intrigued by the idea of dismantling the Port Authority operations from under one roof to two," Christie said.

Transportation experts said splitting the authority into separate entities has endless unknowns. Would there be toll booths at both ends of the Hudson River crossings? Could New Jersey afford to make fixes of its crumbling transportation infrastructure without cost-sharing from New York? Which state gets assigned the lion's share of the authority's current debt of roughly \$22 billion?

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Judy Bertsch, who lives in Morris Mews, enjoys lunch Thursday with her friends. The Morris County nutrition program serves lunch at the Midday Friendship Center in Morris Mews in Morristown. KAREN MANCINELLI/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

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