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Cortlandt Food Bank Ramps Up For Thanksgiving

by Jessica Glenza (email) 11/17/11

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Maria Rykowski of the Cortlandt Emergency Food Bank

Photo Credit: Jessica Glenza

CROTON-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. – Volunteers for the Cortlandt Emergency Food Bank are preparing for their busiest weekend of the year, the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Double the usual volunteers will gather to give out 100 turkeys, fresh produce, canned goods and non-perishables to Cortlandt families.

“One woman said, ‘If it wasn’t for the food bank, I wouldn’t be able to put a nice meal on the table,’” said Maria Rykowski, one of the food bank volunteers. “The last few years, you see people who have never been to a food bank,” she said. “Two years ago, it was one of the first years the economy was tanking, we had to up our staff,” she said.

A food bank represents the convergence of many charitable forces. The 100 turkeys the food bank will distribute, gracing tables in Peekskill, Buchanan, Montrose and Croton, were donated by the Croton Rotary Club. Girl Scout troops volunteer stuffing bags for food bank families.

The Food Bank For Westchester supplies about 90 percent of the Cortlandt Emergency Food Banks’ non-perishables, and coordinates donations of fresh produce through a program called Project Green Thumb.

Seed money for the food bank came from the Harry Chapin Run Against Hunger, which started in 1983. The 10K run donated \$2,800 to the food bank just last Sunday.

The anecdotal spike in clients, as described by Rykowski, is what she calls an unfortunate "sign of the times." The Cortlandt Emergency Food Bank could even be called a barometer for a national trend, documented by the U.S. Census Bureau.

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The U.S. Census Bureau reports that between 2009 and 2010, 2.6 million more American fell below the poverty threshold. For a family of four, with two adults and two children under 18, this is calculated as a household income of \$22,113 annually. Since 2007, the poverty rate has increased by 2.6 percentage points, from 12.5 percent to 15.1 percent. The 46.2 million impoverished Americans is the largest number ever published, in the 52 years that poverty figures have been published.

On average, the food bank serves 386 clients once per month. The Food Bank For Westchester, which Rykowski cites as supplying as much as 90 percent of the food distributed through the Cortlandt Emergency Food Bank, says on its website that food requests increased 45 percent since 2009. Throughout Westchester, more than 7 million pounds of food is distributed each year, which is turned into more than 5 million meals for Westchester residents.

This Saturday is the food bank's busiest weekend of the year, but other weeks are very challenging. Cold winter months through March remain the most difficult months of the year for food banks and the families they serve.

"People's mindset is totally on Thanksgiving and the end of the year," said Rykowski. Many people need the food bank most in winter months, when seasonal outdoor work is not available, she says.

Still, the mood remains positive at the food bank, as welcoming faces greet each family, and no one is ever denied on their first visit. After a client's first visit, they must get a reference from clergy or a doctor.

"This is supported by so many people, and so many new people," said Shirley Gillis, who has worked with the food bank for nearly 30 years, and just as long with the Harry Chapin Run. Gillis recently received an award for her decades of service to the food bank. More than 50 people regularly volunteer for the food bank.

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