September 2009 Economic Impact Survey

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Feeding America is the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization, serving an estimated 25 million low-income Americans each year through its network of 205 food banks and their 63,000 charitable feeding agencies, including food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters.

The current recession and the rise in unemployment are having a profound effect on the nation's food banks. In early September 2009, Feeding America conducted a brief survey of food bank members to learn more about the challenges faced by food banks, their member agencies, and clients served. A total of 176 food banks participated in the survey. Following are key findings from the survey:

Rising Demand, Rising Unemployment

- Rising need for emergency food is nearly universal – 99% of all participating food banks reported increases in demand for emergency food assistance over the last year.
- **The average increase in demand across the network from summer 2008 to summer 2009 was 30%.** However, the increase in need for services over the last year varies across the nation, ranging from 5% in some areas to more than 150% in others.
- Food banks reporting increased demand of more than 50% include Asheville, North Carolina; Fort Myers, Florida; Minneapolis; and food banks in South Carolina, Mississippi, Missouri and Colorado.
- High unemployment across the nation – which reached 9.7% in August – is a critical factor in the rising need for emergency food. Local economic circumstances, such as plant and business closings, have a significant impact on rising need for emergency food. Ninety-one percent (91%) of food banks cite unemployment as a critical factor in the increasing need for emergency food over the last year, and 79% identified underemployment as a major contributor.
- In contrast, in a similar survey conducted in May 2008, only 43% of food banks cited rising unemployment as a major factor in the need in their community. At that time, the cost of food and fuel were the primary concerns for more than 90% of food banks. Although about a third of food banks report that these costs continue to be a significant concern, unemployment is now the most critical concern cited by food banks. Other factors that food banks cite as very important to rising demand in their communities include housing costs (49%) and health care costs (46%).

New Faces

- Food banks report that increasing demand is particularly driven by more first-time users of the food assistance system (98% of food banks) and more newly unemployed (92%).
- Existing clients need assistance more frequently than before, according to 72% of food banks.
- More than half of food banks (56%) also report that they are seeing more children as clients.

Struggling to Meet the Challenge

- It's becoming increasingly more difficult for many food banks and their agencies to meet the needs of their clients, especially when new clients arrive all the time. Despite the fact that the nation's food banks delivered approximately 2.63 billion pounds of food between July 2008 and June 2009 – an increase of 21.4% over the prior year --many are struggling to meet the increase in client demand.
- More than half (55%) of food banks reported that they or the agencies who help distribute the food they provide have had to turn people away in the last year.
    - While a majority of food banks report that this has happened "occasionally," one-fifth (20%) reported that this has happened "frequently."
- Approximately 78% of food banks also reported that they or their partner agencies have had to reduce the amount of food provided or the frequency of food distributions in their area.
    - A little more than half (51%) report that this happens occasionally, while about one third (31%) stated that this has been a frequent occurrence in their area.
- While food banks are struggling to meet the demand, approximately three-quarters report that they have benefited from the help of more volunteers in the past year.
- Among those food banks who have received additional food, storage and distribution funds provided through increased emergency funding to support the federal government's TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) program, 92% say these funds have been very important to their capacity to meet the growing demand.
- About half (49%) of food banks also cite increased benefits under SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps) as very important to the clients in their area.

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Feeding America provides low-income individuals and families with the fuel to survive and even thrive. As the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity, our network members supply food to more than 25 million Americans each year, including 9 million children and 3 million seniors. Serving the entire United States, more than 200 member food banks operate 63,000 agencies that address hunger in all of its forms. For more information on how you can fight hunger in your community and across the country, visit www.feedingamerica.org.