

Economic hardship leads more people to Jackson food pantries

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Katie Rausch | Jackson Citizen

Patriot Lebecca Gills, right, laughs while helping other volunteers from Kellogg remark and box Pop-Tarts at the Food Bank of South Central Michigan. Gills was joined by about six other volunteers who worked for several hours relabeling the donated food, which could not be sold in stores because of a label misprint. The company donated the mislabeled product to the food bank.

Jackson resident James Belle never thought he'd find himself standing in line at a food pantry.

Yet there he was on a recent Saturday morning at Immanuel Lutheran Church's pantry in Jackson to help feed his family.

Belle, 49, lost his job in shipping and receiving at Melling Tool in Blackman Township in January after working there six years. Both he and his wife, Angela, a licensed hairdresser, are out of work.

The couple, whose 21-year-old daughter JaLisha attends Adrian College and 17-year-old daughter Andrea attends Jackson High School, are falling behind on bills. The family had earned about \$60,000 a year — or about \$1,153 per week — on the couple's combined salaries. They now rely on about \$300 weekly in unemployment benefits.

"I'm still supporting my family the best I can," James Belle said. "We're pretty much on a fixed income. It's real tight."

The Belles are among thousands of Jackson County residents who regularly seek help from the area's 20-plus food pantries because of the struggling economy. Many are former members of the middle class who in better times were donating to — rather than seeking help from — such agencies.

With the county's unemployment rate at 15.1 percent, local food pantries and nonprofits are feeling that pressure.

Last year, about 936,000 pounds of food — or 78,000 pounds a month — was delivered to Jackson County from the Food Bank of South Central Michigan in Battle Creek, said Dan Salerno, the food bank's fund development director. The bank is already seeing a 30 percent increase in food distribution in Jackson from this time last year, he said.

Twice a month, the food bank takes and delivers orders to Jackson County during tailgates. Agencies decide how much food they need based on the need in their community, Salerno said.

These agencies operate emergency shelters, soup kitchens, church-run emergency pantries, and more.

The food pantry at the First Church of the Nazarene in Blackman Township assists more than 200 families every first and third Saturday of the month, said volunteer Tracy Basnaw.

"We have regulars, but we're seeing a lot of new people lately," she said. "We're really busy."

Each family gets about three meals worth of food with items such as cereal, meat, vegetables and bread.

"We don't run out of food, (but) we've had to increase what we buy," Basnaw said.

The food pantry at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Jackson gives out about 3,800 pounds of food each week, volunteer Jack Gahagan said.

Most of the pantry's food comes from the food bank and donations from local organizations, he said.

The pantry opens its doors at 9:30 a.m. every Saturday morning, and volunteers see about 300 families each time.

"Some people are out there as early as 6 o'clock," Gahagan said.

Gahagan said he has heard comments from families like "I'm so glad you're here," and "I never thought I'd be in this situation."

He said he is not surprised that many families show up for the pantry. "When the

economy started going down and people were losing their jobs ... all of a sudden, you're tight on money," he said. "Where's the food coming from?"

Jackson resident Arden McBride goes to the food pantry at Immanuel Lutheran every Saturday. "It really helps everybody," he said. "It's a good thing."

Feeding America, the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity, says one in eight Americans face hunger, and only 12 percent of its clients are homeless.

Food banks and food-rescue organizations get their food from a variety of sources — including donors, local food drives, farmers, local retailers and food salvage, according to the organization. While food donations are appreciated, the food bank and nonprofits can get more bang for their buck with monetary donations, food bank officials said. Every dollar donated to the Food Bank of South Central Michigan provides seven meals, Salerno said.

The Salvation Army in Jackson recently started a weekly fresh-produce pantry as a result of United Way's Neighbors In Need campaign.

The pantry has seen more than 300 families every Monday in recent weeks, said Salvation Army Maj. John L. Mallett. About 16,000 pounds of food has been given out in a four-week period at the pantry.

"The hard part has been getting the word out to folks (about the pantry)," said Sue Phillips, Jackson County liaison for the food bank.

Phillips said Salvation Army's regular food pantry, which runs Monday through Friday each week, receives about 25,000 pounds of food each month from the food bank.

Jackson resident Marlene Walz heard about the fresh-produce pantry from Immanuel Lutheran. "People don't have money to buy food," she said as she stood in line at the Salvation Army's food pantry on a recent Monday morning.

Belle said he just takes life one day at a time.

"I believe I can make something happen," he said. "I believe the man upstairs has a purpose for me."

He said the local food pantries are a blessing for his family and many others in the area.

"What if they weren't there?" he said in a recent interview at his home. "We wouldn't have those greens on the stove."

About food pantries

- Last year, about 936,000 pounds of food — or 78,000 pounds a month — was delivered to Jackson County from the Food Bank of South Central Michigan in Battle Creek

- Pantries say cash — rather than food — donations go farther: every dollar given to the Food Bank of South Central Michigan can provide seven meals.

- The Food Bank has about 1,000 volunteers who work there during the year.

- Food pantries are seeing many first-time visitors — residents who in better times donated food or money.

- There are more than 20 area food pantries run by non-profit organizations and churches that are members of the Food Bank of South Central Michigan.

How You Can Help

- To volunteer or make a donation to the Food Bank of South Central Michigan, call 269-964-3663 or visit www.foodbankofscm.org. To volunteer or make a donation to the United Way of Jackson County, call 784-0511 or visit www.uwjackson.org.

- For an updated list of local food pantries and contact information, call 211.