

Food Banks Face a “Perfect Storm” of Surging Demand as Shutdown Drags On

Michael Williams et al. · CNN

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(CNN) — Demand has doubled at a Washington, DC, food bank over the past few weeks, while another in Texas has been forced to dip into emergency hurricane reserve funds to meet demand. Meanwhile, a Florida charity is giving out 300,000 meals per day but, an official there says, “still it’s not enough.”

After a nearly monthlong [government shutdown](#), the looming [suspension of federal food benefits](#) in November is poised to put millions of Americans at risk of going hungry — and food banks and other charities across the country face a bleak outlook as they head into a busy holiday season.

More than a dozen large and small charitable nonprofits told CNN they have exceeded their ability to help and warned that the level of support they can provide will fall far short.

“The real impacts are starting now,” said Brian Greene, CEO of Houston Food Bank. “There’s been some uptick, but nowhere near what we’re going to see by the time we get to early November. ... it’s going to be unprecedented.”

With Thanksgiving just weeks away, hundreds of thousands of federal workers who have been furloughed or forced to work without pay are becoming new faces at food banks and other charities, which are also bracing for more demand as the Trump administration signals that it doesn’t have the funds to provide food stamps to nearly 42 million Americans next month.

Those factors combine to form a “perfect storm” that will push charities past their brink, said Miette Michie, a board member of the Emergency Food Network, which serves parts of central Virginia. The volunteer-based food distribution site has consistently been at capacity since the shutdown began, Michie said — at which point all the volunteers can do is tell people to call back the next day.

“It makes you angry. ... You’re messing with people’s lives here,” Michie told CNN. “This is not just a game, it’s actual people, working people, whose lives are being affected by this.”

Dave Silbert, who leads So What Else, a food bank in Washington, DC, told CNN that “it’s brought a level of chaos and uncertainty.”

“How do we expand?” he asked. “How do we go from 450,000 pounds of food to 550 or 600,000 pounds of food a week? How do we go from raising \$300,000 a month to \$400,000 a month?”

States rush to provide support

States across the country are working to fill the gap on their own.

California Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom and South Carolina Republican Gov. Henry McMaster have deployed their state’s National Guard troops to support food banks, and Nevada Gov. Joe Lombardo, a Republican, [has signaled he’s prepared](#) to do so as well.

New Mexico, Minnesota, Washington and West Virginia have announced millions in funding to support relief programs, while Virginia, home to tens of thousands of federal workers, is setting up its own food-assistance system for residents who receive SNAP benefits. That program is expected to cost \$37.5 million a week and can be funded through November from the state’s surplus, Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin said Tuesday.

But not every state is able to match federal funding. Several nonprofit directors told CNN that food banks were always meant to supplement, not replace, federal aid programs and that the timing of this influx of need will only further stretch social safety nets.

Residents in Georgia, for example, receive about \$250 million in SNAP benefits monthly. Food banks distribute only about \$4.5 million worth of food each month, said Amy Breitmann, the CEO Golden Harvest Food Bank, which serves 24 counties in that state and South Carolina.

“The food bank is supposed to be the safety net underneath SNAP, right?” Breitmann said. “It’s not supposed to replace that.”

Food banks already reeling from federal cuts

The surge in demand at food banks across the country comes months after the Trump administration terminated millions [in funding for a program](#) that allowed food banks to buy food directly from local farms, ranchers and producers.

Greg Higginson, Chief Development Officer of Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, said that there’s been “an erosion of the federal food support,” over the past year. A quarter of the food the Second Harvest Food Bank distributes comes from the Emergency Food Assistance Program, he explained.

Between the shutdown and an already-lost millions of dollars from federal budget cuts this year, the situation is “unprecedented” for the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina, a charity that has scrambled to launch pop-up shops in areas with the most SNAP-reliant and federal-worker-heavy communities, said president and CEO Amy Beros. Her group lost \$2 million when the local food purchasing program was cut earlier this year and had roughly 80 truckloads cancelled from the Emergency Food Assistance Program.

“We know there’s no way for the food banks to fully fill the gap,” Beros said.

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