

# Food providers see shadows of Depression-era need

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ures were 6.4 in September of 1991, compared to 7.2 this year.

In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau announced in early September that the number of poor Americans grew by 2.1 million in 1991 to a total of 35.7 million, or 14.2 percent of the population. That marked the highest figure since 1964, when 36.1 million were in poverty. The 1992 numbers were based on a 1991 poverty line of \$6,932 annual income for an individual living alone, and \$13,924 for a family of four.

Another report released in September by the Medford, Mass.-based Tufts University Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy showed that about 30 million Americans go hungry regularly — a 50-percent increase from the mid-1980s.

To temporarily ease the burden of those in need, a large number of agencies within the Diocese of Rochester are carrying on the tradition of providing special help for the holidays — from serving Thanksgiving and Christmas meals to gathering contributions for food baskets.

Yet these organizations are experiencing the economic crunch as well.

Norm White, coordinator of emergency services for the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry, noted that demand has increased tremendously for the approximately 550 Christmas baskets that his office prepares.

"We took all the applications that we could within two weeks; in the past it might have taken four or five weeks," said White. "People are really concerned that if they don't get a basket quick, they're not going to get it at all."

A similar trend has unfolded in Rochester, according to Mary Dickerson, supervisor of community resource services for the Catholic Family Center.

"More people are knocking on our door, and they're coming far earlier this year," said Dickerson. "They know there are no resources out there. All the agencies are suffering right now, and our clients feel that."

White pointed out that this is an especially tough time of year for poor people who have fallen behind on their rent payments.

"Landlords need to collect rent so they can have their own Christmas money, so you see a large number of evictions," he said.

Dickerson noted that increasing demands have forced CFC to alter its previous policy of making holiday provisions to "the general public." Now

services are limited CFC clients; all additional requests are referred to other agencies.

A cutback in special holiday services has also become necessary at a Rochester-based food distribution agency.

"We used to help organizations with things such as Christmas baskets. But we're kind of out of the holiday business," said Tom Ferraro, founder and executive director of Foodlink, formerly the Genesee Valley Food Bank, located at 56 West Ave., Rochester.

"Hunger is not a seasonal affair. What's happened over the last few years has been that the regular demand for food has accelerated to such a degree, we're having difficulty in trying to keep enough food on hand for those who need it weekly," Ferraro explained.

According to Ferraro, Foodlink distributes more than six million pounds of food each year to approximately 500 charitable organizations in Monroe and nine surrounding counties.

Giovina Caroscio, executive director of the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, echoed Ferraro's experiences.

"There is something about the holidays where our minds and hearts are focused on the needs of people, and I think that's important. But that's still only a one- or two-month period out of the year," Caroscio said. "There are people who struggle day after day after day. The last week in October, we had nothing — and I mean nothing — left in our food cupboard."

Caroscio provided statistics revealing that the social ministry office's food pantry served a total of 9,432 meals in September of 1992, compared to 5,184 for the same month in 1991.

"People will say, 'Oh, it's just the same people coming back each time.' But we're getting so many more new people," she said.

"When you look at the condition of the people, it's compatible with the 1920s and 1930s Depression," White commented.

The bleak economic picture has not only increased the number of those in need, but also has lessened the number who feel able to give.

"The giving rate will be down, so soup kitchens and food closets will be hurting," reported Philip H. Schervish, an assistant professor and social-welfare policy expert at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

"I would anticipate a very hard (holiday) season, harder than in the

past," Schervish added.

According to a national survey conducted by the Gallup Organization this past spring, 72 percent of American households made average total charitable contributions of \$899 in 1991. That figure marked a decline from 1989, when 75 percent of households contributed an average of \$978.

Those interviewed are hopeful — albeit cautiously — that the policies to be implemented by President-elect Bill Clinton will succeed in reversing these negative trends.

"What we heard in the campaign is that domestic policy will be brought more to the forefront. Now I'd be very, very pleased if Clinton's first order of business would be to put together a package of what he means," Schervish said.

"Over the last 12 years we've seen a dismantling of our human-care system," Caroscio commented. "With the budget deficit we're in, one man and a new administration aren't going to change things for some time."

Foodlink's Ferraro believes that before the nation's hunger problems can be solved, other issues need to first be addressed.

"Hunger is the most responded-to

symptom, but the real problems that create hunger are poverty, unemployment and housing," he said. "There's more than enough calories in the world, let alone the United States. The problem comes back to social justice."

In the meantime, people like McPherson will do their best to live out the holiday spirit — despite their financial hardships.

"I still try to make my children feel good about Christmas, regardless. I want them to know that Christmas is the time of year to give, not receive," she emphasized. "They shouldn't think it just means getting presents."

EDITORS' NOTE: The 23rd annual Christmas Appeal co-sponsored by the Catholic Courier and diocesan Social Ministry begins with our next issue.

Money collected will go directly toward emergency services not funded through any type of government or public assistance. Donations are used to obtain vouchers for food, medicine and other short-term services.

Prior donors will receive direct mailings for the appeal. New donors may send contributions to Christmas Appeal c/o Diocese of Rochester, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624 or call 716/328-3210, ext. 303.

## Free Thanksgiving dinners offered at various locations within diocese

Several organizations within the Diocese of Rochester have notified the *Catholic Courier* of free Thanksgiving dinners for those in need.

All dinners will be held Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 26, unless otherwise noted. Locations and times are as follows:

- Bethel Full Gospel Church's Body Shop Ministry Center, 14 Anson Place, Rochester, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Participants will also be able to receive clothes from the church's clothing closet during these times.

- Boys and Girls Club, 500 Genesee St., Rochester, from noon to 3 p.m. Reservations are requested by Nov. 23 at 6 p.m. Call 716/328-3077.

- Cameron Community Ministries, 48 Cameron St., Rochester, at 11:30 a.m. Call 716/254-2697, by Nov. 25 at noon, for reservations.

- Church of the Reformation,

111 N. Chestnut St., Rochester, from 1 to 3 p.m. For those requiring transportation or delivery service, call 716/325-3873 by Nov. 23.

- Open Door Mission, 210 W. Main St., Rochester, will host two programs: a religious service at 11 a.m. followed by dinner at noon, and another service at 8 p.m. followed by dinner at 8:30 p.m.

- St. Martin's Place, 55 Ontario St., Rochester, at 11:30 a.m.

- St. Peter's Kitchen, 681 Brown St., Rochester, from noon to 1:30 p.m.

- Two M's Restaurant, 2222 Lyell Ave., Rochester, from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

- Free Community Kitchen, St. Peter and Paul Church, 160 High St., Elmira, from 2 to 3 p.m.

- First United Methodist Church, 340 Main St., Geneva. Dinner is scheduled for Wednesday, Nov. 25, at noon.

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