



November 25, 2009

## Advocates give a Thanksgiving plea for the hungry

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MAMARONECK — A stream of people filed in and out of a church food pantry Tuesday as anti-poverty advocates called for increased government help for the hungry.

A new measure of hunger was released this week, showing a surge in families across the country who say they struggle to pay for food. While Thanksgiving tends to bring an outpouring of help from volunteers, that help only goes so far, said Mark Dunlea of the Hunger Action Network of New York State.

"The entire community comes together to make sure that no one goes hungry," he said of this week's holiday. "That's great. The problem is that hunger is a 365-day-a-year problem."

A panel of advocates, meeting at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, called on Congress to simplify access and improve nutrition in the nation's food assistance programs. A raft of nutrition services, from school lunches to meals on wheels, received a yearlong extension after expiring in September. But a vote on the programs' future is expected in March, Dunlea said.

He called for pressure on New York representatives to champion nutrition programs.

Applications for food stamps in Westchester are growing steadily, from about 11,000 in 2007 to more than 17,500 so far this year, according to county statistics. The number of people receiving food stamps is growing every month, from 39,000 in October 2007 to 57,000 in October 2009. That's a 47 percent increase in food stamp recipients in two years.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture charted a 36 percent increase last year in what it calls "food insecurity," a lack of consistent access to food. By the measure, about 22.6 percent of children live in households that are struggling to put food on the table.

Others who are especially at risk, Dunlea said, are senior citizens whose retirement accounts plummeted in value, the working poor and those laid off during the recession.

"For children, hunger is a particularly pernicious problem," said Cora Greenberg, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association. She described the toll that poor nutrition takes on a child's mental, social and emotional development.

In 2007, 8.7 percent of children in Westchester County were considered poor, with incomes under \$22,000 for a family of four, she said. Now the percentage is over 11 percent, meaning 26,000 children are in that category.

The Rev. Deacon Lynn Werdal said she's seen a growing number of people coming to the St. Thomas food pantry on Tuesdays, from 40 people a year and a half ago to 70 or 80 nowadays.

Lidia Perez, 44, said she turned to the pantry for help this year because she's been unable to find work as a house cleaner.

"It's difficult, because a lot of people are looking," she said.

## Additional Facts

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