

Gas costs cut pantry visits

Many poor can't afford to drive, receive half usual amount of food

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LA Daily News

Article Last Updated: 06/20/2007 10:16:47 PM PDT

SANTA CLARITA - Santa Clarita's poorest residents can't afford the gas needed to get to a local food pantry for semiweekly pickups, as UCLA reveals in a recent study that more and more of the poor are going hungry.

Since the local pantry allows clients a limited number of items each time they visit, those who can make it just once a month are getting only half the amount of food as before.

"Not only can they not afford the food, they can't afford or don't have the transportation to come pick up free food," said Belinda Crawford, executive director of the Santa Clarita Valley Food Pantry.

The group distributes more than 1,600 pounds of food a day during a three-hour period, which totaled more than 450,000 pounds of staples in 2006. Half of its nearly 3,000 unduplicated clients are children; more than 950 families participate. Nearly 450 seniors participate today, which is more than double the number since September.

Eligibility hinges on a client's household income. An individual may earn no more than \$15,315 a year and a family of four is capped at \$30,975 annually.

Santa Clarita is often seen as the domain of upscale consumers, but roughly 16percent of city households subsist on less than \$29,000 a year, according to a 2002 city study.

Crawford recently noticed that visits were dwindling, so she surveyed clients; 35percent said they cut back to once a month because of transportation issues. Many piggyback the trip onto a doctor's appointment, and one woman who has no vehicle carools with another client.

"My friend's bringing me, but sometimes she needs gas money, and I don't have it to give," said a 39-year-old woman who identified herself only as Roberta. "I would like to come twice a month, but it's hard."

Roberta, who visited the pantry Wednesday, relies on the outlet for bread, fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, noodles and toiletries. She and her 10-year-old son live in the eastern part of the Santa Clarita Valley, and Roberta does most errands on foot. Her son qualifies for free breakfast and lunch at school during the year and is being given a free breakfast at summer school.

Some tote groceries on the bus, but with limited space allowed and little ones often in tow, the trip is difficult.

The UCLA report shows that more than 30 percent of low-income residents statewide often are unable to put enough food on the table. That's more than 2.5million people, and about 775,000 adults often eat less or go hungry.

Hunger can mean lost days from work, increased health care costs and diminished efforts at school.

The policy brief was issued Tuesday by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, one of the top centers nationwide.

Findings show that while the number of affected people suffering from what researchers call "food insecurity" - rationing, or choosing between food and other essentials - has declined from almost 34percent in 2003 to 30percent in 2005, it was still up from 2001.

Rates of food insecurity vary along ethnic lines, with low-income African-Americans at 37.5percent, Latinos at 32.6percent, whites at 28.6percent and Asians at 24.1percent.

Ironically, the findings show affected adults in low-income households are more likely to be battling obesity; 64percent of those adults in 2005 were overweight or obese versus 58percent in homes where food availability was constant.

Crawford, who oversees the local pantry, says parents often skip meals to save food for their children.

People donate items to food pantries during the winter holidays, but Crawford said her shelves run bare in the summer, when kids out of school raid the pantry at home.

More than 60 clients in Castaic, Val Verde, Acton and Agua Dulce have participated in the pantry's once-a-month outreach to those areas.

For information on the pantry's operations, visit www.scvfoodpantry.org.

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