Food insecurity on the rise this winter

Local food banks, pantries have seen an increase in use

by Alison Harford
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The St. Francis Episcopal Church offers a no-questions-asked, drive-through food pantry every Friday from 4 to 6 p.m.: anyone who drives up only has to give their name to receive a prepackaged bundle of food. Typically, Pastor David Sakrison said, the pantry serves 300-350 people per week, but in January, that number rose to over 400 per week.

“This is new territory for us,” Sakrison said.

The trend was seen across Moab: the Grand County Food Bank served 130 households in January (241 people), according to Miriam Graham, the food bank coordinator. In December, it served 80 households. The food bank is available to people who meet certain income limits once per month.

“I’ve been here for almost two and a half years, and our shelves are definitely emptier than they used to be,” Graham said.

The Moab Valley Multicultural Center’s food pantry, too, has seen an uptick in use. MVMC’s pantry, which is available to individuals twice per month, offers a box with bread, eggs, peanut butter, pasta and pasta sauce, canned vegetables, beans, and canned proteins like chicken or tuna. In December, the food pantry gave away 918 meals—for comparison, the year before, it served 517. Rhiana Medina, the nonprofit’s director, said the pantry has served over 1,000 meals before, but that’s very uncommon.

Graham, Sakrison, and Medina said it’s hard to pin down an exact reason food insecurity is rising, but it may be exacerbated by high food prices, a lack of seasonal work in the winter, and an expected reduction in monthly benefits for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
SNAP recipients. Recipients were receiving more under the declared public health emergency for COVID-19, but the government didn’t renew the emergency declaration, meaning that among other things, SNAP recipients will stop receiving the extra monthly benefit—for most, that was around $100—in March.

Both the Grand County Food Bank and the Episcopal Church’s food pantry receive a portion of their food from the Utah Food Bank, and for the rest, they rely on donations. MVMC relies fully on donations, Medina said.

Ginette Bott, the president and chief executive officer at the Utah Food Bank, said that normally, food banks across the state experience their highest need during the summer months when kids are home from school. Bott said she and Utah Food Bank staff had hoped that as pandemic supply chain issues eased, families who struggled during the pandemic would be able to financially recover—but instead, 2022 saw climbing fuel and food costs.

“If you have a family who was impacted financially during COVID and are now dealing with inflation, a family who has never been able to get back on their feet completely, it doesn’t matter how low gas prices come down or when egg prices come down, they’re still struggling,” Bott said. “We had thought recovery would take 18 to 24 months, but I think it’s going to be longer than that.”

Food prices

Inflation at the grocery store is impacting the price of nearly everything, but the highest price increases were seen in eggs, butter, flour, oils, and bakery products. Right now, a dozen eggs at the Moab City Market will cost a shopper $5.79 (a dozen organic eggs cost $8.99); a pound of butter $5.29; a gallon of milk $3.89. Medina said MVMC usually offers a dozen eggs in each of its food pantry boxes, but as egg prices rise, MVMC has had to offer only half a dozen eggs to some recipients.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. consumers were still paying 11.8% more for food eaten at home in December 2022 than in December 2021, despite inflation falling over the past six months. Consumers were also paying more for energy services like electricity (15.6%), commodities such as cars and apparel (2.1%), and services such as transportation and medical care (7%) than they were the year before.

Sakrison said the Episcopal Church will purchase perishable items each week to hand out in the food pantry; the cost of eggs, meat, and vegetables purchased for the pantry was very high in
January. The church can afford to purchase those items through donations from its parishioners and its partnership with the Church of Latter Day Saints, Sakrison said.

When food stores get low at the church food pantry and Grand County Food Bank, they’re able to alert the Utah Food Bank, which can deliver emergency items, Bott said. She said the staff sometimes feels like it’s playing whack-a-mole: issues have been popping up constantly, all across the state. Getting an emergency delivery to Moab takes a full day—the Utah Food Bank is located in Salt Lake City, a four-hour drive—but a fix is on the horizon: by the end of the summer, Bott said, the Utah Food Bank will have a new warehouse located in Blanding.

“I think distribution will be easier and more cost-effective by the summer,” she said. “We’re excited to have that project completed.”

*Each food bank/pantry accepts donations: you can contact each directly to donate or volunteer. This article was suggested by a Moab Sun News reader. Readers like you are an essential part of our team: let us know if you have a question or an idea at moabsunnews.com/send-us-a-story-idea.*