

Hunger Stories 2026

Pretzel City Parish, Reading PA, Pastor Bruce Osterhout

The four monthly food pantries/2 Senior Box (CFSP) distribution sites of the Pretzel City Parish, Reading PA are seeing record numbers of neighbors coming for help. Christ Lutheran church, Reading PA was completely wiped out of food on Monday, February 9 and people were still coming. We had to put a sign on the door that we had nothing left! For 30 years, we have partnered with Helping Harvest Fresh Food Bank here in Berks/Schuylkill Counties and we have never seen this much need before.

Christ Lutheran Church, Rev. Matthew Best

We've seen an increase in people accessing our refrigerator that has grab and go items in the medical outreach clinic. We are not a food distribution site, so the items in the fridge are meant to hold people off until they can get a meal.

The WELL Food Pantry at Union Evangelical Lutheran Church, Ashlyn Drummond

Last month, we served 1,001 individuals. While we are seeing an overall increase in visitors, we have noticed several specific shifts:

- **Demographic Changes:** We saw a significant decrease in visits from our Haitian neighbors recently, likely due to local concerns regarding ICE activity. This is slowly improving as people become more comfortable, but it remains a factor.
- **Appointment Trends:** We are seeing fewer no-shows. Typically, we expect 10 to 15 no-shows per day, but last week that number dropped to four. While no-shows allow us to accommodate those without appointments, the high attendance rate is pushing four-week eligibility appointments further into the next month, resulting in longer waitlists for new individuals in immediate need.
- **Emergency Meals:** Requests for emergency meals are on the rise. Many people cannot wait two weeks for an appointment. Additionally, those who are unhoused or in unstable living situations have a limited capacity to store food, necessitating more frequent, smaller distributions.

- The Working Population: A significant number of new visitors who are unfamiliar with our sign-up process are employed. Finding resources and navigating schedules is particularly challenging for those who are working.

Lazarus Gate Food Pantry, Susan Barclay

We have seen a slight uptick in the numbers of families we serve at Lazarus Gate Food Pantry. During the Government Shutdown last fall, I asked my volunteers to take over the food distribution one evening as I was spending so much time listening to those we serve. During that time the uncertainty was devastating to them. They wanted to be heard and I listened. They voiced concerns over the prices of food, particularly meat. And at that time I too was unable to purchase meat to give them. But it wasn't just meat. All food seemed to be more pricey. They were distressed with the cuts to SNAP and the effect that had on their increasing food budgets. Plus, the new rules for SNAP benefits were frightening. In Rockwood we have no mass transit system. So you NEED a car to get to and from work. We deliver some boxes of food because some of our families don't have access to transportation to visit our pantry or their beat up cars are not reliable. How are they to get to a job? Daycare is costly and not readily available in Rockwood. Who will watch the young children or school age children on weekends and in the summer? Their fears were real. Add to that cuts to Medicaid. Now medical bills will cut into their ability to purchase food. They feel lost in all this bureaucracy and have no voice. I tried to reassure them that all would be well. But I watch as SNAP and Medicaid benefits are cut and I'm not sure how they will survive. The Government Shutdown ended. But the fears and hopelessness remain.

Trinity Lutheran Church, McAlisterville, Pastor Karen Ward

I serve a rural congregation in Juniata County that has a daycare center. We are the only 4-star daycare center in the county.

Some of our daycare full-time staff are losing their SNAP benefits and scrambling to find other ways to feed their children. The stress and dread this is causing for mothers with few options and resources is unfair and unnecessary. Since we are unable to pay our staff a living wage with benefits, we rely on services to help them feed their families. We already have a staff shortage. If our staff need to find other employment, the daycare will close and parents will be left with no full-time childcare while still needing to work, myself included.

We also rely on a food program for the daycare. We provide breakfast and lunch to our children. We will be unable to provide food if these funds end.

The congregation will do its best to help, but the situation is dire.

Shirley McGowan - Founder of the Little Free Market - SALEM LUTHERAN CHURCH.

At Salem Lutheran Church, Lebanon Pa. Every third Saturday a noon meal and Little Free Market is held. The location of the church is in the downtown district surrounded by people who are homeless or living in boarding houses. On the average the church see between 100 to 130 people monthly. The food for the hot meal is from Lebanon County Christian Ministries (LCCM) who obtain the food through government programs and donations. The food for the Little Free Market is obtained by purchasing the food from a local grocery store. The food is also obtained from LCCM. The agreement with LCCM is to donate food that would not be able to be given out on Monday but can be distributed on Saturday. We find through this Ministry that not only are the people are hungry but they are in physical pain. Free over the counter medicine is distributed. The medicine is obtained through Volunteers in Medicine who acquires the medicine through a commodities broker. The medicine is from Amazon and Walmart warehouses and are considered waste. In other words the medicine would be in the landfill. This Ministry provides the guests with warm food. Food to take home and pain relief.

St Andrew Lutheran Church, Pittsburgh PA, Sue Gaugler

We offer 2 free produce distributions each month. The food comes from our Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank and no federal money is used for this program. We can therefore give the food with no income restrictions or data collection. This works well for us because our church is close to universities with diverse populations. We have refugees, families of foreign students and asylum seekers, as well as longtime Pittsburgh residents who take buses to get our produce. Many are elderly.

We offered produce once a month until December 2025 when we added the second distribution. So our monthly average attendance jumped from 57 households representing 159 people to currently 106 households representing 284 people.

We received an emergency food grant of \$2500 from the Ethel Verney fund at the SW PA synod at the time SNAP benefits were suspended. We are using the money to buy shelf-stable protein items to supplement the produce. We are giving peanut butter, canned tuna

and chicken, dried beans and lentils, and shelf-stable tofu. To supplement all these options, we collect a “food of the month” from the congregation. Rice is one example.

We have applied for a larger Verney grant to place a commercial refrigerator in our social hall. We will then be able to offer additional fresh foods. It is possible we will get more food from 412 Food Rescue and maybe the Food Bank, if there are no income restrictions or qualification requirements placed on our customers.

We are seeing new people now that we are doing twice monthly. A church member takes food to 8 of her immigrant neighbors who are fearful of venturing out very often. More parents are coming with children and we have attracted a family of volunteers who are not church members, but faithfully help at every distribution. A new volunteer works across the street and comes after work to help and take food home.

In addition to Produce Distribution, we have a free outdoor pantry that is very well used. We stock it with food that can be eaten without heating if necessary, maybe by people who are marginally housed. All food is donated by church members.

St Andrew has developed a relationship with Bethel AME in the Hill District. They also established a monthly produce distribution. A few St Andrew members help there and a Bethel member helps us. Bethel serves mostly neighborhood families at their distribution and their numbers seem stable. They also pack and deliver about 30 boxes of produce to shut-ins.

We distributed the information about changing SNAP enrollment so I hope anyone who needs that information took action.

In general, need is increasing, people are worried, and we hope to keep responding with God’s love.

Stories from Katie’s Cupboard @ Tabor, Philadelphia, Rev. Jane Marston

One person who had received food for a year or so was getting more hours at her part-time job, so she insisted we stop giving her food. Lately, she’s not getting as many hours and her housing costs have skyrocketed, so she needs to receive food again.

We got a call from an agency that works with the families of murder victims. They had been supplying food out of their own pockets for the family of a victim that had nothing in the house to eat, but the family was a large one. They were very grateful that we could send several full bags of groceries with them for their next visit.

Our current inventory is very low due to the freeze on the delivery of food from TEFAP due to the partial government shutdown. We have dried beans, some canned fruit but no canned vegetables, some spaghetti but no sauce; peanut butter, but no jelly. We've had to save the very little frozen meat we receive for holidays and haven't received canned fish or other meats to fill in the gap.

Over the last three years or so, Katie's Cupboard@Tabor has been serving an average of 200 households each week. The numbers vary from week to week due to a large number of factors: In the first week of November (when people didn't receive their SNAP benefits), we served 272. That number dropped back down when more people had the means to make their own food choices. Our building is not handicap accessible, so we serve people outside, which means the weather makes a bigger difference than at indoor pantries. For a while we were able to reach about 30 households through a program with DoorDash, but that program ended March 1, 2025.

Many of the people who come are Spanish speaking, and though we don't know their legal status, even if they are Puerto Rican or have visas, fear of ICE is widespread and for good reason. We encourage them to authorize someone else to pick up food for them, but the number of proxy forms hasn't increased much.

More recently, our numbers have been a little bit lower. This may be largely weather related, and the numbers are coming back up to normal again. I also wonder, though, whether this might be partly due to the large cuts (and current freeze on deliveries due to the partial government shutdown) in the TEFAP program. We are fortunate to be serving a population that likes and knows how to cook beans, but even they are getting tired of dried chickpeas.

In addition to the food we get from SHARE, we also pick up fresh food once a month from a local organization called Caring for Friends. We had been doing this before this winter, but we've been able to pick up larger quantities, which has been a godsend. Feast of Justice, another ELCA feeding ministry located near to us, has been willing to share with us when they receive extra quantities of a particular item. Our VISTA worker is also a graduate student, and she picked up leftover canned goods at the university food pantry at the end of school terms. We are looking forward to the coming growing season when we get fresh produce from a community garden and from a couple who grow vegetables on their own property. A woman's group at a local church bring canned meats to donate to us at each of their meetings, and a local private school ran a food drive on our behalf.

These efforts enhance what we get from SHARE with much needed variety, but they don't replace the missing quantities from government programs.

Grace Lutheran West Philadelphia Food Ministry, Rev. Dedra Florence-Johnson

We get there around 7 in the morning to get everything ready before the food trucks arrive. But even at 7, people are already lined up, waiting to get a number for food.

We see a lot of the same faces every week. Sometimes it's a mother and her daughter coming together. We also have boxes packed especially for seniors—so far this year, we've given out 260 of those.

Over the past few weeks, 979 families have come through our doors. And as we get closer to the end of the month, when SNAP benefits run out, we see even more people coming. They talk about food prices in the market being so high that they don't get much for their money. Families depend on us because paying for utilities, rent and clothing is getting harder.

But let me tell you about God's grace. During the summer, we were barely getting any meat in our deliveries. But since December, we've been receiving meat every single week. This allows us to put full meals together along with the fresh fruits, vegetables, and canned goods.

Some of our volunteers talk about how expensive gas is, and having to drive every day. But one woman was so grateful—she said if it wasn't for Grace Church, she didn't know how she would make it on her income. We've noticed that people go from distribution center to distribution center during the week to collect food.

And as I walked around praying with people in line, I asked if they had gone to the location a few blocks away to get food. I was told, "These other places around here don't give out nearly as much as Grace does." People don't only get food. We also put out tables with free clothing, books, toys, and household goods.

Jersey Shore Care and Share Food Pantry, The Rev. Dr. Kerry Aucker

Jersey Shore Care and Share Food Pantry serves the residents of western Lycoming and Eastern Clinton counties. We saw a large increase in the month of March. Our Pantry Choice on Monday evenings jumped from 18 households per week in December to 51 households the last Monday of March. We served a total of 393 households in the month of March which is a record. The sad part is that the majority of clients being served are seniors 60+. 70% of our clients are SNAP recipients so they were effected in November and then with the rising cost of utilities and food and medicines many of our seniors are struggling.

In summary I would describe the seniors coming to our food pantry as struggling to pay bills and afford food. People are very appreciative of the food we give them. We have also been blessed with donations from Weis, Save a Lot, the Central PA Food Bank and many individuals who drop off food almost daily. We have been truly blessed. No one who comes to us goes hungry.

Feast of Justice, Rev. Patricia Neale

Statement made after the PHAC day in the Capitol in late March:

Last Wednesday was a great time to network with lawmakers and other advocates. I met with 5 legislators--4 of whom serve in districts served by Feast of Justice. We spoke about the challenges faced by front-line anti-hunger programs because of the increased demand due to rising food costs/medicaid and SNAP cuts/general inflation, as well as the decreased supply as a result of federal cuts to food bank providers. It is a perfect storm, creating anxiety from the guest to the sites themselves. I spoke about how Feast of Justice now has over 5500 active households--and how we are only able to serve 1/3 of those each MONTH, with one of the reasons being access to enough food. Our ask of the legislators is for an increase in SFPP and PASS funding. Even that will not be able to reach all the families in need--but it will be movement towards food security for Commonwealth families in this most vulnerable time.

Grace Lutheran Church, Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

The picture attached is all we got to feed 175 families today at Grace. This is how we treat working tax paying citizens, veterans, seniors and children when we don't fund care for each other.

Name
SNA VEGGIE CHIPS HERBED STUFFING FLAVOR (12)5 oz
SNA CHEX MIX BOLD (8)3.25 oz
DES PIE MIX OREO COOKIE (6)8.6 oz
BEV DUNKIN ICED COFFEE PACKETS (12)6 ct.
SNA NUTRIGRAIN BARS (ASSORTED KINDS) (VP)
FRU CRANBERRIES DRIED USDA (300)1.16 oz (110723)
PUR DAI MILK 2% (QUARTS)
PRO ORANGES (BULK) USDA BONUS (100283)
PUR PNM EGGS (ORDER BY DOZEN) (HATCH)
PRO PRODUCE ASSORTED (DONATED)

St. Paul's Lutheran Food Pantry, York April 2026, Patricia Snyder

St. Paul's Pantry is opened four Tuesday morning's a month. We are run by over 40 volunteers. Those needing food do not need an appointment. Shoppers come in and choose their food from shelves, refrigerators and freezers. Some families come for food every other week. Some come once a month. Others come less frequently. We also have 3-8 new families each week.

In the summer of 2025, we continued to experience an increase in the number of families coming for food each week (average of 85 families per week). During the winter months of December, January, February and March, our numbers decreased (average of 50 per week), but it looks like April's numbers are going up again. We are not able to determine the reasons for the increase or decrease in attendance as most of our shoppers speak only Spanish.

Most of the food we distribute comes from Central Penn Food Bank and York County Food Bank. Much of these foods are paid for by the State Food Purchase Program, United States Department of Agriculture, The Emergency Food Assistance Program. and Pennsylvania Agriculture Surplus System.

With federal budget cuts, the availability of food through Central Penn Food Bank and York County Food Bank has decreased. The cost of food has grown. Our church has spent much more money on food in 2025-2026 than in any other year.