News

Volunteers are pictured in a file photo serving people in need during a free dinner provided b

Volunteers are pictured in a file photo serving people in need during a free dinner provided by the Emergency Assistance Department of Chicago Catholic Charities. (OSV News/Jim Young, Reuters)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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Even before the ongoing federal government shutdown, volunteers and staff had seen an increase in the number of families seeking assistance from the food pantry at Our Lady of Victory Church in Baltimore.

In October, the food pantry served 60 families, an increase from the 41 families it assisted in May, said Fr. Mike Murphy, the pastor. He expects more families will need help in November amid the uncertainty over the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP

"I do anticipate that there will be a greater need, so we're trying to continually stack the food pantry so we can meet those needs," Murphy told the National Catholic Reporter.

President Donald Trump's administration said on Nov. 3 that it would partially fund SNAP after federal judges in Rhode Island and Massachusetts issued rulings

requiring the federal government to keep the nation's largest food aid program running. But on Nov. 4, Trump posted on social media that SNAP benefits would remain frozen until the shutdown ends, sparking further confusion.

> 'We can try to help our leaders understand that these people should not be pawns on their political chessboard. That's not fair. These are people who are in need of food.'
> —Deacon Kevin Sartorius
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Amid that uncertainty, Catholic food pantries and other programs that provide food to the needy expect that more individuals and families will seek their services. Pastors whose parishes run food pantries as well as staff and volunteers at local Catholic Charities agencies and St. Vincent de Paul societies are preparing for that increased need.

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Fall River in Massachusetts is organizing a food drive that began Oct. 31 and will run through Nov. 18, with two collection sites Fall River and New Bedford, two struggling cities where more than a third of the population qualifies for SNAP benefits.

"It's the first time that there's been a government shutdown this long where people are actually being forced to go without food, which is a horror in a country like ours," said Susan Mazzarella, chief executive officer of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Fall River.

Mazzarella told NCR that her agency's Solanus Casey Food Pantry in New Bedford has seen a 6% increase in people using its services as compared to a year ago. This October, she said 2,570 households utilized the food pantry, receiving 45,711 pounds of food.

"Whatever is happening at the federal level, we still are trying to respond to the needs that we have," Mazzarella said. She added that the increased need is happening at the same time that federal spending cuts have led to a 24% reduction in supplies to the food pantry.

"Even if the government turns on the SNAP benefits, we still have an increasing need and less of a food supply to meet that need," Mazzarella said.

A man holds a sign during "A Rally for SNAP" on the steps of the Massachusetts Statehouse ir

A man holds a sign during "A Rally for SNAP" on the steps of the Massachusetts Statehouse in Boston Oct. 28, ahead of the suspension of federal SNAP food assistance benefits Nov. 1 amid the ongoing U.S. government shutdown. (OSV News photo/Brian Snyder, Reuters)

Fr. Robert Oliveira, pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Fall River, said that he expects more families will seek help from his parish, which runs a food pantry and a twice monthly soup kitchen that feeds more than 40 people.

"Depending upon the need that's out there, we may have to ask our parishioners to support the effort, and the people have been so generous. Whenever we've asked for anything, they've been very kind in responding," Oliveira said.

The staff at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Baltimore is also preparing for the likelihood that reduced SNAP benefits will lead more people to use its community outreach programs, which include a food pantry.

"In the past two weeks, we have seen an increase of 20% of requests for help, with people coming in because they need groceries and they need food to feed their families. Most of them were directly affected by the government shutdown," said Fr. Jeffrey Dauses, the pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary Church.

Dauses expects the numbers of people seeking food will "significantly increase" because of the status of SNAP benefits.

Anthony, a volunteer at the St. Benedict Church food pantry in Philadelphia, hands out dried f

Anthony, a volunteer at the St. Benedict Church food pantry in Philadelphia, hands out dried fruit to a client during an Oct. 31 distribution that took place hours ahead of the scheduled Nov. 1 lapse in funding for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, amid the federal government shutdown. (OSV News/Gina Christian)

"The good news is that the people of the parish are responding beautifully," Dauses said. "The number of donations of food to that pantry has grown greatly since the government shutdown and we're able to meet the need as it stands now."

Andy Wayne, a spokesman for Catholic Charities of Baltimore, said almost 700,000 families in Maryland stand to be affected by the changes to SNAP.

"They will need groceries and food and they might not know where to turn, so a lot of our efforts are going to be centered in getting [out] the word about our hot meals programs and our food distribution services," Wayne said. He acknowledged that the extra need will likely strain those programs.

"It'll be taxing but it's 100% our mission to serve Marylanders in need," he said.

The situation is similar in northern Nevada, where more than 77,000 people receive SNAP benefits. Marie Baxter, the CEO of Catholic Charities of Northern Nevada, told NCR that her agency is offering free weekend dinners to families affected by the federal shutdown.

"We wanted to create a family-friendly, super-safe space where people can make sure their kids get fed on a Friday night, Saturday night and Sunday night," Baxter said.

The agency is also extending the hours on its food pantry and increasing food distributions in the rural communities that it serves, she said.

"We want people to feel really supported," Baxter said.

She said that while the nonprofit world cannot completely bridge the gap normally filled by the federal government, agencies like Catholic Charities of Northern Nevada are committed to keeping their doors open.

"We'll do what we can as long as we can to meet those needs and hope that we will have some clarity in the future from our government about what it looks like to support individuals and families who are vulnerable," Baxter said.

A volunteer in New York City looks on as people receive food at a food pantry.

A volunteer in New York City looks on as people receive food at a food pantry run by Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens April 24, 2020. Parishes and Catholic

Charities programs are seeing an increased need for food as SNAP benefits are delayed. (OSV News/Mike Segar, Reuters)

Ralph May, the CEO of St Vincent de Paul Southwest Idaho, which in 2024 served more than 90,000 people through its five food pantries, told NCR in late October that the demand for food services was already up this year before SNAP benefits were delayed.

"We have a lot of people who are very concerned," May said. "At our biggest food pantry in Boise, we had more than a 27% increase in traffic from the same day last month and we're expecting a 30% increase tomorrow." He said a lot of people are fearful amid the uncertainty of new regulations for SNAP recipients.

May said his agency hoped to alleviate some of that fear.

"That is to say, we are here, we're stocked, we're going to serve people, we're going to serve them as long as we can and I'm confident that we'll be able to serve them," said May, who credited local community members for "stepping up" with food and monetary donations.

Deacon Kevin Sartorius, CEO of Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma, said that his agency is also seeing an increased need for food. In late October, the agency was serving 300 families a day and distributing 83,000 pounds of food in a week, he said.

"We've doubled what we're giving because we've doubled the number of people that we're seeing," Sartorius said.

He said about 680,000 people in Oklahoma, about 17% of the state's population, receive SNAP benefits.

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"We have single moms who are using SNAP to help make ends meet for their kids and so they're really in a rush to try and find a way to make a plan to feed their family tonight and tomorrow night," Sartorius said.

The federal government normally provides about $130 million in SNAP benefits every month to Oklahoma families.

"It's irreplaceable," Sartorius said. "We can't solve that, but we can brainstorm with people on what to do. We can get them food to the extent that we have it, and we can try to help our leaders understand that these people should not be pawns on their political chessboard. That's not fair. These are people who are in need of food."

In the meantime, Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma, like other Catholic organizations across the country, will be leaning on donors to keep its pantries and food distribution services going amid a time of increased need and political uncertainty.

"We're ordering food and giving it out in record amounts," Sartorius said. "But we know we can't sustain it so the government has to figure out what they're gonna do and get on with it."

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