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Gulf Coast food banks still in high demand

by Mark Waller by Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- Even with the deep sea oil hemorrhage halted and much of the fishing in the Gulf of Mexico reopened, major charity groups say the needs of impacted families remain dire.

Officials from the local affiliates of Second Harvest Food Bank and Catholic Charities said members of the fishing, oil and service industries are still hurting six months after the Deepwater Horizon explosion. Perceptions that the crisis is over and that money from BP is taking care of all the losses have detracted from fundraising, officials said.

"It's a sustained 25 percent increase in demand," said Natalie Jayroe, president of the food bank, referring to the number of people asking for food help.

Second Harvest has distributed more than 610,000 meals to families affected by the BP oil spill. Catholic Charities has served 35,277 people with food vouchers, mental health counseling, financial help with housing costs and baby supplies.

"There seems to be a sense that help is pulling out of the region," said Steven Scheurich, vice president of customer service for Entergy Louisiana, a local utility provider. "Unlike the hurricanes, the financial outpouring has not come to fruition. The overall sentiment is that it's BP's responsibility."

Scheurich announced a \$100,000 donation from Entergy to Catholic Charities.

Iray Nabatoff, director of the Community Center of St. Bernard, a Second Harvest partner, said requests for food, clothing, assistance information and computer laboratory sessions continue to rise.

"We're seeing the ripple effects of the oil spill and the cessation of fishing activities right through the economy," Nabatoff said. "I think we're still on the ascending end of this. I wish I could report things are

abating. On so many levels, it's actually more of a struggle now.?

[Mark Waller writes for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans.]

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