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Food pantries face empty shelves

Requests for help spike as donations of food and money fade.

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Alice Aguilar, 3, from left, and her mother, Irene Cuenca, receive from from Program Director Rick White at the Salvation Army in Glendale on Tuesday, March 29, 2011. There has been a shortage of food at Glendale's Salvation Army since the beginning of the year. "We may have to give less food to each person," Rick White says. "We let them come every 30 days, but we may have to extend it to every six weeks," White adds. (Cheryl A. Guerrero/Staff Photographer)

By Melanie Hicken, melanie.hicken@latimes.com

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SOUTH GLENDALE — With fewer donations coming in and demand continuing to rise, local food pantry operators say their supplies have reached dangerously low levels.

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In recent weeks, Salvation Army Glendale has seen the shelves of its food bank reach near-empty, said Rick White, director of social services.

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"This is the worst I've ever seen it," said White, who has operated the pantry for the past four years. "It seems like every food drive we do, we get a little bit less than the last time we did it. And yet the numbers of people we are trying to help keep going up."

Throughout the protracted recession, the pantry has continued to see new clients come through its doors, White said, with nearly 1,200 people served last month.

Loaves and Fishes, a food bank in South Glendale operated by Catholic Charities of Los Angeles Inc., is also serving more than 1,000 clients per month, said program coordinator Lora Young.

Dwindling donations have been compounded by the absence of about \$20,000 the nonprofit typically receives annually from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. That money is hanging in the balance as Congressional legislators wrangle over the federal budget, Young said.

"Around the holidays, we always have a lot of food come in. We usually can make it through the year's end with that food, and then in February, the FEMA money is there," she said. "It's not here yet, and I don't know when it's coming, and the shelves are looking pretty bad."

New research published by Feeding America, the country's largest network of food banks, reports more than 1.7 million Los Angeles County residents struggled with hunger in 2009 — more than in any other county in America. The study compiled data collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Census Bureau and other agencies.

And Los Angeles Regional Food Bank has reported a 40% increase in people requesting services, according to California Food Policy Advocates.

Most food banks in the area have seen the spike as well, said nutrition policy advocate Nicola Edwards.

"What is incredible is that many organizations are seeing people that used to be donating the supplies now coming in and asking for services," Edwards said. "It's really a dramatic shift."

"These are people who never thought they would need these services," she added.

As local food pantry operators continue to grapple with the demand, they are looking to the community to help bridge the gap.

Young has put out the word to local churches that host hold monthly food drives, while several Glendale Rotary club chapters joined forces last weekend to collect food for Salvation Army Glendale.

--Gretchen Meier contributed to this report.

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