

# Whole Foods to Food Banks

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Designer Accessories, Expensive Automobiles And Donated Groceries: Meet the New Needy

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The Germantown woman was loading boxes of food from the Manna food bank into a shiny sport-utility vehicle one recent afternoon when she was approached by a donor dropping off food.

"What group are you with?" the donor asked the woman, who promptly burst into tears. With her Toyota Sequoia and quilted Vera Bradley bag, she had been mistaken for a volunteer -- rather than a client waiting to take home a bag of potatoes.

"I'm a mother of four just trying to feed my kids," the woman sobbed to the donor, who was taken aback, then sympathetic.

Such awkward scenes are playing out frequently at food pantries and other charities across the region as they struggle to help the still upward-spiraling number of formerly middle-class people knocking on their doors.

For the charities, the surge in demand has tested their resourcefulness -- and sometimes their patience. Not only must they stock millions of pounds of additional food in bigger warehouses, but they also must adopt fresh tactics to help the newly needy, who can be more bewildered, more emotional and more selective than their traditional clients.

One intake volunteer at Food for Others in Fairfax County, for example, has learned that the formerly affluent won't wait outside in line for food at evening neighborhood giveaways, lest they be spotted.

"We have more people than ever coming here thinking they'd never ever be here," said Amy Ginsburg, executive director of Manna Food Center in Montgomery County. Manna, along with most food area pantries, requires people to prove by income that they need assistance.

The group is moving into a 12,000-square-foot warehouse in Gaithersburg on Oct. 5 to meet the growing need. Manna gave away 3.1 million pounds of food to 102,519 Montgomery County residents last fiscal year, up from 2.1 million pounds the year before. They've increased food drives, and cash donations have kept pace.

Manna's workers and volunteers try to make the experience as dignified as possible for everyone, helping clients load their cars and handing out juice boxes and pretzels to families waiting in increasingly longer lines. On a recent morning, residents dressed in pressed khakis waited for boxes of fresh produce, meat and canned goods alongside those in dirty T-shirts.

"Not having enough money for food is a bizarre, foreign experience" for the new needy, Ginsburg explained. "They're still getting over the shock."

Ginsburg and others running local charities expect the number of residents seeking help to continue to rise even as the economy improves. Jobless numbers are increasing, they point out, while severance checks and unemployment benefits are running out.

Fairfax found in a recent survey of 89 churches and nonprofit organizations that 32,044 households received food assistance in the last quarter of 2008, a 39 percent increase from the previous year's fourth quarter. Almost half of the respondents reported helping families that had never asked for aid before -- many of them former middle-class residents now unemployed or facing foreclosure.

Wanda Moloney, client relations manager at Loudoun Interfaith Relief, which served 56,000 residents last year, said her group gives food to 100 new families a week. Increasingly, Interfaith volunteers from some of Loudoun's most affluent neighborhoods find themselves packing boxes for their friends and neighbors.

Nobody knows what to say.

"You can see it in the eye contact," Moloney said. "The tears say it all."

Barbara Curtis, 61, said that the experience of getting groceries from the food pantry was "startling at first." She and her husband, Tripp, lost their sprawling Loudoun home this year after he became ill and was unable to work. With five children at home, their descent from a comfortable middle-class life seemed to happen overnight. "It really let me see how vulnerable we all are," Curtis said.

Terry Wilson, 43, a floral designer, also sought help in Loudoun after he was bumped from full time to part time at work and lost his benefits.

But it wasn't easy. The first time he pulled open the door and took in the crowd in the waiting room, he turned around and walked out.

"It was like, 'Whoa . . . I can't do this,' " he recalled Wednesday as he picked up food for the second time. But then he realized having the groceries could help him shift money to his utility bill and his car payment. "Everyone else is doing it, and times are tough. Let's suck it up and see what happens."

Out in the Manna parking lot, the Germantown woman -- who was visiting the food bank for the second time and did not want her name used to spare her children embarrassment -- was inspecting her food allotment with the zeal of a soccer mom at Whole Foods. She turned to Manna for help after her husband refinanced their home into a costly subprime mortgage and then moved out. She has been able to get the mortgage modified, but her finances remain precarious.

She checked the expiration date on a carton of soy milk, unscrewed the lid of a jar of organic peanut butter to make sure it was sealed and read the label on a tube of ground turkey. The turkey did not pass muster, and she politely returned it to a Manna staffer. "I don't know what's in it," she explained.

"It's a double-edged sword," she said. "You can't go without food, but certain foods at Manna, no way I'm going to feed my kids. It's kind of snotty." She rejoiced in a big bag of day-old bagels, sport drinks and doughnuts, treats she could no longer afford to buy her sons.

At times, this changing face of need has sparked moments of confusion and discomfort for those who are trying to help.

Christine Lucas, executive director of the Arlington Food Assistance Center, said she is often asked by volunteers and donors about the number of clients driving fancy cars. (A well-dressed couple who declined to be interviewed was there recently, putting their sacks into a Cadillac.) Lucas responds that it could be an employer's car or a family hanging onto its last asset.

Or it could be the formerly middle-class mom with Calvin Klein sunglasses perched atop her head who said she was going to have to search Epicurious.com for recipes that use black beans because the pantry had given her so many cans.

Appearances can be deceiving, as Debbie Lane and her two children discovered when they drove out to an affluent neighborhood in Chantilly to deliver \$200 worth of school supplies to a needy family. Lane, of Fairfax, said her kids had offered to reuse some of their school supplies from last year so that they could contribute to the back-to-school drive, organized by the food pantry Our Daily Bread.

"My son, who is 8, said, 'Mom, if this is the neighborhood we're dropping these things off in, I think we should turn our car around,' " Lane recalled. "It was a great segue for me to talk about what poverty does and does not look like."

But even she was surprised at the size and scope of "this palatial home with two brand-new expensive cars in the driveway. I was really grappling with this. I was thinking, 'This is crazy.' " She later learned that what she had tried to explain to her kids was true: The family that needed the supplies was renting rooms in the home's basement and had recently seen its income drop when the mother died of cancer.

The Germantown mother of four said she knew why she'd been mistaken for a volunteer by the donor dropping off food -- it was her car.

"Because I have the [Sequoia], she thought I was doing the same thing she was, I guess," the woman speculated. She watched the donor drive away with a mix of envy and sadness, remembering what it was like "to be normal."

"What a glorious feeling . . . to be able to give to other people," she said. "It is a better feeling to give than to receive. But sometimes you have to receive."

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