

# CITRUS COUNTY CHRONICLE

## Food pantries struggle to meet increased needs

By Nancy Kennedy Chronicle Reporter

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Community Food Bank of Citrus County employee Mike Wilcox shuttles boxes of pancake mix to be stored inside the food bank's Homosassa warehouse Friday, July 15. The organization provides tens of thousands of pounds of food to various charitable organizations across the area.

Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

It nearly broke Maria Cyr's heart, but she had to turn away more than 30 people seeking food at the Thursday, July 14 weekly SOS food pantry – they were out of food to give away.

“We started at 7:30 (a.m.) and by 9 we were almost out of food,” said the SOS executive director. “We ended up serving 175 families.”

SOS food pantry, based at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hernando, distributes food every Thursday.

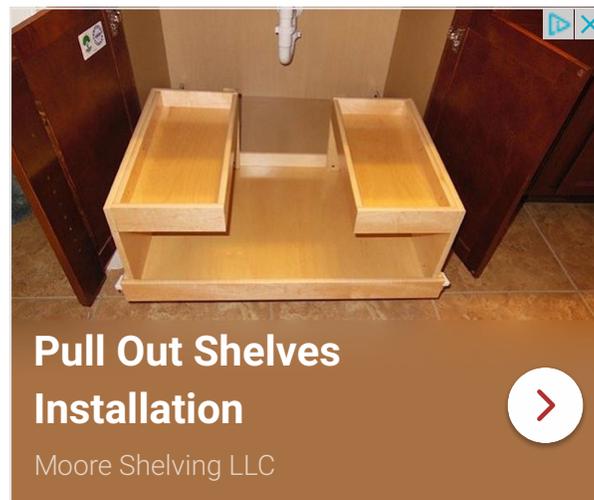
However, Cyr said, she’s considering distributing food only twice a month instead of every week, because her costs have gone up.



Community Food Bank of Citrus County volunteer Wesley Wooters uses a pallet jack to maneuver a large quantity of vegetables into place Friday, July 15, at the food bank’s Homosassa warehouse.

Matthew Beck Chronicle photo editor

“For the people, their electric bills have gone up, rents have gone up, the price of gas. For us, the cost of the food we buy is going up. ... We went from spending \$954 per week in January to now spending between \$1,600 and \$1,700 per week, and we don’t know if we’re going to survive. That’s the honest truth.”



## Pull Out Shelves Installation

Moore Shelving LLC



Bell

Stephanie Bell, executive director of the Pregnancy and Family Life Center in Inverness, said her center sees at least two or three new people every day needing food assistance.

“We’re not just a pregnancy center,” she said. “We serve about 92 seniors with food, and between May and June we saw an increase of 100 people needing food.

“What’s really sad, we’re having to cut back on what we can give because we don’t have a lot of money to purchase the food. So, we’re seeing an increase in people, but giving out less food,” she said. “In May, we gave out 4,800 pounds of food, and in June we gave out 4,600 with 100 additional people.”

Bell added that most of the people who are coming to her center for food are working people, two-income households, who just can’t make ends meet.

“It’s so sad,” she said. “It’s the overall need, electric bills, gas, the rent being raised ... All it takes is one illness, one flat tire or car repair bill and it’s a downward spiral, and it’s only getting worse.”

Let's Feed Citrus, spearheaded by the New Church Without Walls and the Rev. Doug Alexander, gets surplus food from a variety of sources, such as FarmShare, which is distributed weekly or bi-weekly, either at the Crystal River Mall or the county fairgrounds.

Alexander said they see up to 1,100 cars come through at each distribution day.

"We've got more people coming for food," he said. "It's not going to get better, so we do what we can to prepare.

"It used to take us two trips to deliver the food to the location, with 10 pallets on each truck, but now we're doing three trips, and that's a lot of food," he said.

He added that in addition to surplus food, he also purchases food to distribute.

"We've got people who depend on us," he said. "They tell us, 'If it wasn't for this, I don't know what I'd do.' But everybody is appreciative and thankful."

Barbara Sprague, Community Food Bank executive director, said, by the end of 2022, the food bank will have provided an estimated 5 million meals to hungry people in Citrus County through the local food pantries and agencies that distribute food.

"We're experiencing more need now than even during the pandemic," Sprague said. "Now we're serving well over 70,000 people per month."

According to the most recent US Census data, the population of Citrus County is 155,582.

Nearly 45 percent of people in Citrus County rely on food assistance.



Alexander

Matthew Beck Chronicle photo editor



Sprague

"People can't make ends meet and they're really, really scared," Sprague said.

### Food sources and costs

Most, if not all, of the 50-plus food pantries, shelters and ministries purchase food and non-food items from the Community Food Bank.

The cost range is from free to 18 cents per pound, Sprague said.

The current cost for meat and canned goods is 18 cents per pound, non-food products are 4.5 cents and produce is 9 cents per pound.

Water, pet food and bakery goods are free.

Also, agencies can purchase retail-grade products at cost.

"That cost has gone up 25 percent," Sprague said.

She added, "Sometimes we'll get a big donation, like \$5,000 from the United Way, and then everything's free for a while, and that's good."

Many of the pantries also rely on donations of food to stock their shelves.

Every third Tuesday of the month, the Esther Chapter of the Daughters of the King women's group at Shepherd of the Hills Episcopal Church In Lecanto has a drive-thru food drive to support SOS food pantry.

They started in June 2020 as a way to help the community during the coronavirus pandemic.

It turned out better than they had expected, and ever since have continued.

"We average about 20 cars coming through each month, and some of those we can count on to bring two or three cases of food," said Cathy Allen, a Daughter of the King member who heads the food donation program. "Another church, Hope Lutheran Church in Citrus Springs, they bring food they've collected from their (members) every month, so it's not just us."

Allen said they pack a long-bed truck from top to bottom with donated food every month.

"It's probably not going to make a significant difference, but we know we're helping," she said.

Sprague said increased gas prices have raised the cost of feeding people for everyone involved, from the cost of trucking the food in to volunteers driving to help at the various food pantries to the cost to the very people needing the food.

"People who come to us for food are running out of gas in our parking lot," Stephanie Bell said.

### What can be done?

First of all, Barbara Sprague said yes, times are tough and challenging, but with all the food pantries in Citrus County, "no one should be going hungry."

Those who need food assistance can call 211 and talk to a live person who will direct them to nearby food pantries. Or, people who have internet access can go to the food bank's website at [www.feed352.org](http://www.feed352.org).

"Part of why we did the capacity expansion to have both warehouses here, we need the ability to flex in times of need – a hurricane, the continuing cost of inflation or another pandemic," Sprague said.

In April, the Community Food Bank purchased the Hunger Relief Complex in Homosassa, part of which it leased since 2013 from its previous owner, We Care Food Pantry.

"We need to be able to feed people with good, nutritious food like fresh produce, which needs refrigeration," Sprague said. "That's a big component in helping people get out of poverty and out of their crisis and become self-sufficient. You can't feed resilience and fortitude with sugar and fat. You have to feed it with good nutritional-value food."

The most economical way to help solve the hunger problem in Citrus County is to donate money directly to the Community Food Bank, because of the bulk buying power of a food bank, Sprague said.

For every dollar they receive, they can stretch it to make 10 meals.

Also, every dollar donated goes directly to the purchase of food, Sprague said. Their operating costs are covered in other ways, such as fundraisers.

Financial donations to the Community Food Bank made through the end of July will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$50,000 by the Black Diamond Foundation.

People can also donate nonperishable food to local food pantries.

"Just look around where you live and find your nearest food pantry, whether it's a church or something else," Stephanie Bell said.

Maria Cyr said SOS is always grateful for canned food donations.

"That helps us a lot," she said. "We get a good deal on meat, but it's the canned goods that kills us."

Cyr is at the SOS pantry from 6 to 10 a.m. every Wednesday at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, 439 E. Norvell Bryant Highway, Hernando, across from Citrus Hills Boulevard, and would welcome food donations during those hours.

Also, any local business, club, group, neighborhood or organization can request a food donation barrel from the Community Food Bank and it will be delivered and picked up when it's filled with food. Call 352-628-3663.

"It's going to take the whole community," Stephanie Bell said, "and the county commissioners and the cities should be standing behind the food pantries, because they're the first line of defense in this community.

"When there's a need, it's the nonprofits that step up, not the commissioners, to keep the people who vote for them fed."

To donate to the Community Food Bank:

Donate online at [www.feed352.org](http://www.feed352.org).

Text the word DONATE to 352-280-3391.

Donations can be made over the phone at 352-628-3663.

Mail a check to: Community Food Bank, 5259 W. Cardinal St, Building B, Homosassa, FL 34446.

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Nancy Kennedy can be reached at 352-564-2927 or by email at [nkennedy@chronicleonline.com](mailto:nkennedy@chronicleonline.com).

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## NANCY KENNEDY

Reporter