

# CITRUS COUNTY CHRONICLE

## Face of those needing food help changing

By Fred Hiers Chronicle Reporter  
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Homosassa resident Leesa Trudeau looks through a bag of food items she was given at the Suncoast Baptist Church food pantry Wednesday morning, Sept. 7. A regular consumer at the pantry Trudeau said the bag of food, that includes meat, bread and dry foods, "will last me a week, maybe more. These folks work very hard," she said, grateful of the volunteers manning the pantry.

Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

A line of men, unshaven and in rumpled overcoats, waiting for a meal from a soup kitchen is often the image many have when they think of the hungry wanting a handout.

The image is of bums, unwilling to find a job or choosing drugs rather than an honest day's work, said Leah, sitting at a plastic folding table at Suncoast Baptist Church in Homosassa.

Leah, who asked that her last name not be used, is a licensed practical nurse and works for two homecare agencies to ensure she gets enough hours to pay her bills.



The reflection of Leesa Trudeau is seen in her side-view mirror Wednesday morning, Sept. 7, as she receives food from the Suncoast Baptist Church food pantry. Like others receiving food she waits in the front seat of her vehicle as food is handed to her through her window.

Matthew Beck Chronicle photo editor

She does not look like the men waiting in line. Instead, she looks like the many people who now regularly come to the church for food, the food pantry's volunteers told the Chronicle.

Wednesday, 65 families, and a few single people, came for help. Each month the number grows. Just 18 months ago, it was 30 families and single men and women.

The pantry volunteers said the fastest growing demographic now to come for help is the elderly.



Ray and Geer

Fred Hiers / Chronicle Reporter

“Many are raising grand kids or even great grand kids,” said Barbara Geer, a volunteer at the food bank for the past eight years. “Their families have moved back home.

“They (the head of the returning families) couldn’t make it on their own or they have an addiction or they’re incarcerated.”

But the people who come for help run the gambit.

One in every five who come have obvious mental health problems, or they are homeless, or they are the working poor, Geer said.

The church is not unique in seeing a growing number of people coming each Wednesday for food.



Suncoast Baptist Church gives food to those needing assistance as well as donating other items like shoes and other clothing some may need.

Matthew Beck Chronicle photo editor

Barbara Sprague is the director of the Community Food Bank of Citrus County. She provides food to more than 60 charitable programs. Before the COVID-19 pandemic her organization provided 1.8 million to 2 million meals a year. This year it will increase to an estimated 5 million, she said.

As for Leah, 43, she moved to Florida a year ago with her 12-year-old son and husband after he was laid off from the Remington Arms plant in Ilion, New York.

In Ilion, she could afford to work only part time and stay home the rest of the day to raise the couple's son.

When her husband lost his job, that all changed.

The family moved to Florida with \$5,000 to cover moving expenses and a few months of rent.

Then, her husband became sick and is now suffering from heart problems. He's been hospitalized three times since they've moved to Homosassa.

"I try not to use the food pantry too much because there are people worse off than me. We at least have a roof over our heads," she said.

A year after coming to Florida, Leah did not think she would be sitting in the storage room of a church asking for food.

In Ilion, she was more likely to be seen helping others.

"I did a lot of volunteer work there, at the church, at school," she said. "When people needed help, like someone to drive them, I'd go over and do it."

Her mother has pancreatic cancer and is in a New York hospice, but Leah said she cannot afford to travel north.

It was Leah's first visit to the pantry.

It was not Burt Conrady's, though.

Conrady, 65, was a fisherman in Key West for more than 30 years. He has been coming to the food pantry for years. He often delivers food using his moped to friends and neighbors who also need help.

“It was hard work,” he said of fishing and shrimping. “I loved every day of it, pulling traps all day, never knowing what’s inside.”



The Suncoast Baptist Church is located in Homosassa on U.S. 19.

Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

He lives alone and has been receiving Social Security disability payments.

He said he was happy. The former fisherman now does odd jobs, mowing people’s grass and painting.

When his sister and mother moved to Citrus County, Conrady said they brought him along and found him a place to live.

He said he sometimes goes to fish markets and buys parts of the fish most people don’t want. If it wasn’t for the food pantry, Conrady said he would not know what to do.

Geer, 67, said the volunteers get to know the clients. They are not freeloaders.

She and other volunteers deliver food to clients who can’t travel to the church.

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“And we check on them,” she said. “We get to know these people and we worry about them.”

She does not see the number of people needing food getting any smaller.

Brian Haton and Jennifer Young live in a tent at a camp with other homeless people not far from the church.

Haton, 40, said he does carpentry work and has applied for work but hasn't received any offers.

Young, 50, clasped her hands together and slightly rocked her torso back and forth.

“I'm always looking for work,” she said.

She said she wound up needing help because: “I had no parents, never learned communication skills and not knowing how to get through life.”

Skip Henderson, 79, is a deacon at the church and helps oversee the food pantry.

He said most of those coming for help are families, often with both parents working to support themselves and children.

“And you get a lot of elderly and they're on fixed incomes and food prices keep going up,” he said. “The inflation is just hurting people.”

The church distributes about 5,000 pounds of food a month.

“I'm just afraid ... for them,” he said.

Leah said she knows many people think only the lazy ask for free food.



Conrady

Fred Hiers / Chronicle Reporter

Regardless of who they are, she said, “you still have to reach out, regardless.”

“When you see someone struggling, help them. People need help,” Leah said.

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