A GROWING NEED

By MaryLynn Schiavi
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Farmers Against Hunger: program helps the state’s working poor

Some say the economy is on the mend, considering that unemployment rates are lower than last year. But according to those working on the front lines of poverty, an increasing number of people are falling into the class of the working poor and are unable to keep food on the table.

“In August we gave out more packages of food than we have ever distributed other than when Hurricane Sandy hit,” said Frank Hasner, executive director of the Franklin Township Food Bank in Somerset which was established in 1975.

Based on his observation, Hasner said the situation is worsening.

“More and more people in New Jersey have to decide whether they are going to pay their rent or have a meal that night,” he said.

While he is apprehensive about how they are going to handle the onslaught in November, which he said is typically a time when the food bank sees an increase in those seeking help, he is hopeful that the community will reach out to help.

Hasner said his concern has increased, especially in light of the most recent data available through the ALICE Project sponsored by the United Way. ALICE stands for “Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed” and

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represents those in New Jersey who are working, but falling behind.

According to 2010 statistics, in Hunterdon County 27 percent of the households are living on less than a basic survival budget. In Somerset and Middlesex, the percentage of ALICE households has now reached 28 percent.

Farmers Against Hunger

“Families that were once stable are now struggling, and some who were once volunteers for our organization, are now recipients,” said Kristina Gutadora, executive director, New Jersey Agricultural Society (NJAS) and the Farmers Against Hunger program.

Farmers Against Hunger works with farmers around the state to distribute produce from their farms to four main distribution centers in Trenton, Mount Holly, Browns Mills, and Camden, ultimately serving more than 70 organizations that distribute 1.2 million pounds of produce annually.

Franklin Food Bank and Elijah’s Promise in New Brunswick are two of the 70 organizations that distribute the fresh produce.

With the help of 40 regular volunteers, the Franklin Food Bank distributed 9000 packages of food to assist approximately 3000 families in the last year.

Gutadora said the demand for assistance is increasing — 15 to 20 new groups around the state have recently asked to be added to the distribution list.

Working with 1200 volunteers who gather and pick the produce on farms around the state, and three part-time truck drivers, Gutadora is the only full time staff member. She said this year the organization hopes to distribute 1.5 million pounds of produce to meet the growing need.

Gutadora said, often the farmers have produce that is not the perfect size or shape that they may not be able to bring to market, but is perfectly good produce. By organizing “gleanings” or a gathering of the produce, tons of produce that might have been wasted finds its way to people struggling to keep themselves and their families fed. In addition, some of the farmers plant rows of vegetables expressly for distribution to the food banks.

“With just five or six people, we can sometimes collect 500 or 600 pounds of produce. After Sandy hit, Eastmont Orchards in Colts Neck invited us to come in and pick whatever we could. We picked 17,000 apples in three days,” she said.

Gutadora said she feels enormous satisfaction from what Farmers Against Hunger is able to accomplish.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m channeling my German grandmother. She was a great believer in not wasting anything,” she said.

In addition to the 40 farms around the state that donate, non-farm donors include Wakefern, Donios Inc., Panera, Wegmans, Colvita, KMT Brrr and the Greenery.

Gutadora said the process of gleanings is also a great team building activity for organizations and businesses, and the employees of Campbell Soup, General Electric and Chubb Insurance have contributed their time and energy to the effort.

From a farmer’s perspective

Von Thun Farm in South Brunswick has been contributing produce through Farmers Against Hunger for the last seven years.

“It makes all the difference to us that Farmers Against Hunger can arrange to pick up the produce,” said Bob Von Thun, manager. He said otherwise, the farmers themselves would have to arrange for delivery making it much more difficult if not impossible.

“It’s great to be able to contribute. For years we left a lot of produce out in the fields because we didn’t have the way of delivering it. Now, we can call in when we have an overabundance of a particular item and we know that it will be picked up and be utilized by someone who really needs it,” Von Thun said.

“We have a pretty good working model right now, but of course we would like to help more people as the need arises,” said Jim Giamarese, who serves on the board of directors of NJAS and owner of Giamarese Farms in East Brunswick who has been involved with the organization since its inception in 1996.

“It was a pretty unique organization when it began and as time went on, it kind of evolved into a program that the farmers are really happy with,” he said.

The wish list

For Farmers Against Hunger to continue to help the growing number of New Jersey residents, Gutadora said funding to pay for drivers to work full time and additional trucks and fuel would help the organization serve a greater number of people in need.

She said this November, any individuals and groups that could help out with gleanings at Hallick Farm in New Egypt would be greatly appreciated.

Gutadora said it depends on the weather but up until a few weeks before Thanksgiving the organization is able to pick sweet potatoes. It’s very hit or miss depending on when the frost hits, but every hand helps.

She said, “This time of year, we really need people who are willing to be ‘on call’ because we’ll get a last minute call from a farmer who might say — the frost is coming come and take as many potatoes or sweet potatoes as you can.”

For further information about donating or volunteering with Farmers Against Hunger, visit the Web site at www.njasociety.org/farmers-against-hunger.html or call Kristina Gutadora at 609-462-9691.

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