

Stock the Shelves | Help neighbors in need

Nathan Phelps, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 9:34 a.m. CDT October 20, 2016

A client at the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry explains how the assistance helps feed her family. USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin is holding its Stock the Shelves campaign through Nov. 25. Every dollar collected is spent in the donor's community. Joe Sienkiewicz/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin



(Photo: Oshkosh Northwestern, Joe Sienkiewicz / USA TODAY NETW)

It's just before 10 a.m. on a Wednesday morning. Twenty people wait patiently in neatly arranged chairs at the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry.

Starting on the hour numbers are called off beginning with "one."

The clients stand up when their number is called, check-in with pantry staff and begin pushing shopping carts through cleanly laid-out aisles of food. Numbers continue to be called in the background.

"Twenty five."

Patrons pick items from shelves and freezers. Carts fill with spices, juice, vegetables, milk,

cheese and meat. It's been a busy week. Mondays are usually the busiest day.

Similar scenes play out in communities large and small around Wisconsin. Access to food, and other necessities of life, continue to be an issue for nearly half of Wisconsin's residents.

"Our numbers are steady. They don't tend to change or spike a lot, however, every month we're getting 75 to 100 new registrations," said Hope Schaefer, program manager for the pantry. "We see people who lose their jobs abruptly and all of a sudden ... they go from a double-income to single-income family, and they have to figure out 'Where am I going to get my next meal from?'"

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USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin is launching its annual Stock the Shelves Campaign Friday with the goal of collecting \$842,625 for Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, a food bank working with more than 550 pantries in the eastern and central sections of the state.

Stock the Shelves began in 1995 as a Post-Crescent food-donation program and expanded to all 10 USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin markets in 2010. This year, Green Bay Packers wide receiver Randall Cobb is serving as a spokesman for the campaign.

Although there is a statewide goal, the effort is local. Every dollar collected by the campaign is spent in the donor's community — no money is directed to pantries in other cities.

Pamela Henson, regional president of USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin and publisher of Post-Crescent Media in Appleton, said the drive is aimed at eventually raising \$1 million annually to fight hunger.

"I can't stress enough the immediate daily needs in all 10 of our communities those less fortunate and for those below the poverty level," she said Wednesday. "Please give to Stock the Shelves, your community and your neighbors in need. It makes more of a difference than you'll ever imagine."

Henson said donated money will stay in the markets where it's raised.

"If you donate \$100 to Stock the Shelves in Appleton, that \$100 is going to stay in the Appleton market," she said.



Sarah Koskubar of Oshkosh uses her cell phone calculator to keep track of her food points for the month. She uses the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry to supplement her food stamps. The stay at home mother has a husband who works full time. They have children and find it is hard to make ends meet each month. The OACP serves over two thousand clients each month and gives out over a million pounds of food each year. Joe Sienkiewicz / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (Photo: Oshkosh Northwestern, Joe Sienkiewicz / USA TODAY NETW)

The goal for The Post-Crescent, Appleton, is \$315,000. Stock the Shelves is being supported by a number of area businesses and foundations including J.J. Keller, U.S. Venture, the B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation, the Gannett Foundation, Fox Cities Credit Union, local credit unions, and the Green Bay Packers' "Packers Give Back" initiative.

The campaign ends Nov. 25.

Officials say many of the people using pantries are employed and working to make ends meet, but circumstances landed them in a position requiring help. Three months is the average use time for people using a pantry as a bridge to navigate a rough patch of life.

Patti Habeck, executive vice president of Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, said each story is unique.

"What we're seeing now is there are a lot of working poor," Habeck said. "There are folks working one or two jobs and there are two-income households that are still utilizing food pantries because the dollars aren't able to stretch far enough for the family."

Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin has facilities in Little Chute and Milwaukee. It's on track to provide more than 40 million tons of food this year to 400,000 people through its network of partner pantries and hunger-relief programs.

A recent report from the United Way indicated nearly half of Wisconsin residents struggle to pay for basic needs like food and transportation.

"In total, 960,131 households in Wisconsin – fully 42 percent, and triple the number previously thought – are struggling to support themselves," the report says.

Thirteen percent of those households live at, or under, the federal poverty level, while the remaining 29 percent fall above that level but struggle to afford basic live housing, food, savings and health care.

Sarah Koskubar and her family have used the Oshkosh pantry for several years. She's a stay-at-home mom, while her husband works full-time. She said the pantry, which she visits monthly, plays a key role in keeping the family fed.

"Sometimes our food stamps don't last the whole month, so it's been a real help in that in between," Koskubar said.

Schaefer said the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry sees an increasing number of senior citizens using the program.

"Social Security doesn't get them far enough," she said. "We usually see about 2,000 households a month, so the need is definitely there and it's been pretty steady."

Earlier this month Koskubar's son helped out with a Boy Scout drive to collect food for local pantries, she said.

Like hundreds of thousands of other Wisconsin residents, food is one of many bills faced by the family.

"Your rent, car payments, gas," Koskubar said.

Schaefer said it's not uncommon to see people with full-time jobs using the pantry.

"I'd say over half (or new registrants) come in and they have jobs, and they are what are supposed to be well-paying jobs, and they just can't make ends meet," she said. "In situations where something happens suddenly, they have to figure out a way of getting that food source. Maybe it is foregoing food that month because they need to pay a bill and they don't want to get behind on rent."

In 2014, the average monthly cost for food in Wisconsin was \$176 for a single adult and \$533 for a pair of adults and two small children, according to the United Way study. Those figures marked a 20 percent increase in costs between 2007 and 2014.



Volunteers Paula Allen and Denise Lien sort fruit and vegetables to be put out for clients at the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry recently. The OACP serves over two thousand clients each month and gives out over a million pounds of food each year. Joe Sienkiewicz / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (Photo: Oshkosh Northwestern, Joe Sienkiewicz / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

That's in addition to other basic living costs like housing, transportation and utilities.

"They're making choices between paying their electrical or medical bill and buying food," Habeck said. "A lot of times folks are working and trying to make a go of it, and they just can't get those ends to meet. That's probably one of the sadder situations because it's people working really hard."

Schaefer said, for many, the pantry is a last resort.

“It’s really difficult for families to come here. They don’t want to have to walk through those doors and come in and say ‘I need help.’”

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