

A study released Friday confirms what many food banks in Lorain County already know: At least 15 percent of those living in the county are “food insecure.”

Feeding America, the nation’s largest domestic hunger-relief organization, shows a growing population at risk of hunger throughout Second Harvest Food Bank of North Central Ohio’s service area, which includes Crawford, Erie, Huron and Lorain counties.

The term “food insecure” is defined by the USDA as “access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year.”

According to Julie Chase-Morefield, executive director of Second Harvest, the organization has seen a steady rise in the amount of food it distributes during the past decade.

“Feeding America’s study paints a sobering picture of the economic realities of our region and the challenges that our neighbors are facing to feed their families on a daily basis,” Chase-Morefield said. “This data confirms the growing need that we have seen over the last several years.”

Darla Strah, president of Our Lady Queen of Peace’s Helping Hands Ministry in Grafton, said she has noticed an increase in the number of people needing help to feed their families.

“We are getting a new call weekly, and it used to be monthly,” she said Friday.

Strah estimated the need in Grafton has increased 10 percent. And her church is doing all it can to help those suffering the effects of being “food insecure.”

“We have a soup kitchen on the third Thursday of every month and this past Thursday, we had between 100 and 110 people show up,” Strah said.

Through the generosity of church parishioners, local Cub Scout groups and Second Harvest, the organization is able to keep up with the demand, she said.

In March, Our Lady Queen of Peace held a food drive and Strah filled 40 boxes for the needy. The Cub Scouts of Grafton now are holding a food drive at the Grafton Sparkle Market, Strah said..

In Elyria, Darlene Lauffer, president of the St. Jude Helping Hands Food Pantry, said she too has noticed an increase in the need for food.

On Friday, a day when the food pantry normally is closed, Lauffer witnessed 40 families arrive asking for food. She had only two hams.

Today, the food pantry will open noon to 3 p.m., but Lauffer knows people will begin lining up between 7 and 8 a.m.

She expects nearly 100 people will seek help today.

By the time Tuesday comes, she believes the number of those receiving assistance from the food pantry will reach more than 250.

At the same time last year, 235 families received food.

Lauffer said many people are losing jobs and when they do find one, it's difficult to play "catch-up" with all the bills.

Lauffer said St. Jude's Helping Hands Food Pantry also helps pay for shut-off notices and rent evictions, as well as purchasing gasoline cards.

"The need doesn't stop, and we do the best we can," Lauffer said.

Strah said food demands increase because unemployment pay may have expired or the family may have little or no means to collect food stamps.

The study also found that of those 15 percent in Lorain County who are "food insecure," 40 percent are children.

"Both of these numbers reflect an alarming increase over last year's data," the study reported.

As the coordinator for the church's Back Pack Program, Strah, along with a team of volunteers, ensure that school-age children in Grafton are provided food and other supplies via backpacks.

In April 2013, Strah was serving 18 children per week. The program now serves 30 children per week.

"People can disguise hunger very well and no one can tell how hungry you are," Strah said.

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