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Food banks struggle to meet increased demand



Laura Hayes, a volunteer with Evergreen Christian Outreach, stocks shelves in the food pantry. DEB HURLEY BROBST



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Lily Mott / Special to Colorado Community Media
No two days are the same for Dale Flanders. As executive director of Evergreen Christian Outreach, Flanders led the nonprofit through the most of the pandemic. But the job is even more challenging now as the organization faces a steep increase in demand for its food bank and other services.

Requests for help soared more than 70% in January compared to a year earlier. For all of 2022, EChO served 41% more people than in 2021.

"By the time 2021 rolled around, we were seeing more people than we've ever seen," Flanders said. "And 2022, they went up even higher because now, not only do we have the remnants of COVID, we have a really horrible inflationary issue."

The increasing need for nonprofit services is not unique to EChO and the Evergreen community. According to recent research by the Federal Reserve Bank, many nonprofit organizations have expanded their services in response to higher levels of household financial stress and food insecurity.

As one of the largest human services organizations in the foothills, EChO runs a food pantry, team of social workers, education or job center, overnight shelter and resale shop. Flanders oversees the whole operation.

Other nonprofit agencies are also seeing the increased community needs.

Metro Caring, one of Colorado's leading frontline, anti-hunger organizations, welcomed an average of 580 households a week to its food pantry before the pandemic. During the first week of March, Metro Caring served more than 800 households.

Metro Caring schedules shopping appointments, so households have enough time and plenty of space in the food bank. "Those are booked up. We don't have empty appointments every week," said Brandon McKinley, Metro Caring communications and marketing specialist.

The story is the same for Food Bank of the Rockies, which operates food banks across Colorado and Wyoming. Brittany Pyle, Food Bank of the Rockies executive assistant, attributes the increases in need to inflation and supply-chain issues hitting the economy at the same time.

"Inflation hit a 40-year high, and we're paying 27% more for beef than in 2021. Vegetable oil is up 54%, and freight and refrigerated vehicles have increased their costs about 60% per month," Pyle said.

Pyle says the nonprofit is spending \$1 million more per month to purchase food that it used to receive in donations or commodities before the pandemic.

Both McKinley and Pyle expect the need for food-bank services to continue to increase once federal pandemic relief programs end.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program increased people's benefits during the pandemic, but those ended at the beginning of March.

Within the next year, other emergency funding from the pandemic is expected to end, including increased benefits for Medicare and Medicaid.

"As we know, it's already a problem to choose between health care and paying your bills and paying for where you live," Pyle said. "So, we anticipate we will continue to see larger amounts of people as the year goes through."

Flanders is determined to continue meeting people's needs in Evergreen and the surrounding communities, despite the strain on EChO's resources.

The agency's food resource manager warned Flanders that the annual budget was spent by October last year. His advice: "Keep spending what you need to spend because the need isn't going away."

He attributes the continued success of the organization to donors and the hundreds of volunteers.

"We're not going to operate with a scarcity mindset," Flanders said. "We believe in the generosity of our community."

Keywords
Evergreen Christian Outreach, food bank, Metro Caring, Food Bank of the Rockies

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