

SURGING COSTS OF BOTH FUEL AND FOOD WEIGH ON FOOD PANTRIES, AND THE PEOPLE THEY SERVE

With gas and food prices spiking amid war in Ukraine, food pantries say they're busier than ever.

By Diti Kohli, originally published in *The Boston Globe* 3-27-22



A guest received food from Kaiser Diaz, Mike Rambo, and Danielle Tjalsma (left to right) outside the the food pantry at Lazarus House Ministries in Lawrence. The nonprofit operates a food pantry and soup kitchen on Wednesdays. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

LAWRENCE — Every Wednesday without fail, the staff at Lazarus House Ministries feeds a long line of hungry people: kids wearing Crocs, seniors in wheelchairs, and Esther Pineda, a chatty 71-year-old with thick-rimmed sunglasses.

She arrived last week with a lavender rolling backpack, dotted with daisies, and stuffed it with tuna and trail mix from the food pantry. The haul can “feed the streets,” Pineda said in Spanish through an interpreter. She intended to give some to her bus driver, her car mechanic, her neighbor. Anything left after

that would grace her family dinner table.

“I always share the food,” she added. “It’s a small thing I can do.”

The people Pineda hopes to help are much like herself, struggling with spiraling costs of essentials, which have gone into overdrive since Russia’s war in Ukraine caused a spike in gas and food prices. Workers at pantries like Lazarus House say they’re busier now than most of the pandemic, even as they, too, struggle to pay for and transport the goods they give to those in need.

Six Greater Boston food pantries who spoke to the Globe are seeing the impact firsthand. Maynard-based Open Table feeds 225 families each week, an increase from 175 in November, said executive director Jeanine Calabria. The number of weekly guests at the Watertown Food Pantry has tripled to over 200. And Lazarus House in Lawrence served around 1,100 people at its pantry and 400 at the soup kitchen weekly through the winter. (Two Wednesdays in March, it saw over 1,800 people total, close to a record high.)



Brother Juan Diego, a volunteer at Lazarus House Ministries food pantry, helped organize bags of non-perishable groceries. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

“People’s tires are spinning,” said Kevin Burke, a longtime Lazarus House volunteer from Methuen. “And there’s no traction.”

The crisis is rooted in a confluence of economic pressures, including inflation, the labor shortage, and ongoing supply chain issues, said Laura Veldkamp, a professor of finance at Columbia Business School. COVID case counts are down; mask mandates are gone. But so are pandemic-era relief programs that put extra money in people’s pockets.

And the “increasingly complicated factors worldwide are causing a string of disruptions and pain for the American people,” she said.

Now, it costs more to stock the fridge, to drive to work, to pay the gas bill, to rent (or if you’re able, buy) your home.

Altogether, the tough financial realities have kept 15.9 percent of Massachusetts households “food insecure,” twice as many as before the pandemic. And every day, pantry directors see a crop of new faces.

“A lot of these folks were financially secure. They never struggled in this way before,” said Project Bread CEO Erin McAleer. “Now everything costs more, and people can’t keep up.”

It also lays a heavier hand on people of color, immigrants, and extremely low-income families who make around \$30,000, said Kristen Schalpp, the chief operating officer at Quincy Community Action Programs.

“They don’t have expendable income,” she added. “They’re the ones who lost their jobs at the beginning of COVID. They have child care issues. They’ve gotten sick. There’s no room to move around, no savings. This is it.”

Such is the case for Luzmila Quispe.

She began coming to the Lazarus food pantry in spring 2020, when safety concerns from COVID forced her to retire from Stop and Shop. Now every week, she picks up a weighty plastic bag with beans and Kraft macaroni.

The packaged pitas she took home Wednesday are “a small something to help,” she said. “Still, I cannot fill every meal we need.”

Luis Villodas also uses the Lazarus soup kitchen to supplement meals for himself and his two children. Money is already thin: His rent in Lawrence rose \$50 last year, with another \$50 bump expected in the coming months. Plus, the war has restricted the flow of wheat, corn, barley, and fertilizer and pushed up the price of bread, an added expense that Villodas cannot endure. It’s risen 6.5 percent since February 2021, and wheat costs have surged, considering that the two warring countries are among the leading producers of the grain.



Luis Villodas, a Lawrence resident with two children, left the Lazarus House Ministries' soup kitchen. "Here, there's always enough to fill my belly," he said. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

But Villodas knows that at the kitchen, he can get what he needs, including his favorite meal: rice and beans, with a little chicken.

"It's a place to visit and be fed, no matter what," he said. "Here, there's always enough to fill my belly."

The problem, of course, extends beyond food.

A visit to the gas pump currently costs an average of \$4.25 per gallon in Massachusetts, according to AAA, while Eversource hiked electricity prices 25 percent even before the war. As early as October, the US government expected heating bills to jump by 54 percent from the previous winter.

That's enough to strain the savings of 1,700 households that receive fuel assistance from the Quincy Community Action Program. By March, nearly 300 had already used up their allotment of up to \$1,200 for November through April, said Schlapp of QCAP.

Rita, an 83-year-old Quincy resident who declined to share her last name, burned through her assistance by Feb. 15. That month, she paid \$349 out of pocket for heat, more than a third of her \$900 Social Security payment.

"Without the help, I would be out of oil right now," she said. "No heat. No gas."

Keiser Diaz, a Lazarus House employee, feels the pressure from gas prices, too. His car gobbles up the tank during his short trip to work each day. Twice a week, Diaz takes a longer drive to New Hampshire

to drop his infant daughter with her mother.

Between the groceries, baby formula, and now gas, “things are tight,” said Diaz, 25. “It’s just too much.”

As the appetite for assistance grows, nonprofits have kept pace with demand, but at a steep cost. Natural gas utilities have increased their charges, thus raising expenses for QCAP and similar organizations that help subsidize energy bills. Pantries purchase food at a higher markup. All the while, households have less to donate, with inflation picking away at paychecks.



Alex Dominguez (left) and kitchen manager Jose Rivas prepared meals in the soup kitchen at Lazarus House Ministries in Lawrence. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Lazarus House, for example, had to expand its operating budget from \$50,000 to \$160,000 for the fiscal year ending in April, said executive director Carmen H. Vega.

“That’s essential,” she said, “to allow us to buy the additional food we need.”

Catherine D’Amato, CEO of the Greater Boston Food Bank, said the organization has endured an 11 percent increase in food prices this calendar year, which may translate into fewer groceries for the 600 organizations they support in Eastern Massachusetts. And the cost of other supplies — shrink wraps and paper towels, for example — has risen by 10 to 20 percent as well.

The Federal Reserve recently hiked interest rates and projected six upcoming increases in the hopes of keeping inflation in check, though it’ll take months for that to make a difference. Food banks are “preparing for the fact that these prices aren’t going away soon,” D’Amato said. “Buckle up.”

It seems that residents are steadying themselves for the worst, too.

One man who visited Lazarus House last week nabbed multiple bags of clementines and canned fruit. He balanced them carefully for the walk home until a volunteer saw the load and sympathized.

“Sorry, it’s heavy,” she said.

His response: “It’s never heavy enough.”



People waited to receive meals outside the soup kitchen at Lazarus House Ministries. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

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