

Hungry

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economy is booming, the reason for the upswing in need is anyone's guess.

But Bianco, Meyer and others who provide food for the poor say they think cutbacks in welfare programs are driving some to seek additional help. And they expect to see further increases as more people are forced off the welfare rolls.

The state's 1995 ban on certain commercial fishing nets also is making it hard for former fishers to put food on the table, said Ann Nardi, president of the non-profit St. Vincent De Paul Society, located at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Inverness.

"More people are getting into financial trouble," Nardi said.

Nardi, like the other social service providers, said she sees the need in the numbers.

Last month, the agency gave out 45 boxes filled with food such as canned vegetables, macaroni and dried potatoes. In the same month last year, she said the total was roughly 30 boxes.

All of Citrus' food providers depend primarily on donations — given either directly or through the United Way — to fill their cabinets.

Meanwhile, a substantial amount of usable food is passing the programs by.

Just this week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study showing that Americans waste one-fourth of the nation's food supply, discarding uneaten vegetables, meats and bread from



Times photo — RON THOMPSON

The lunch program at Living Water is serving increasing numbers of needy people. Another church's pantry program has fed so many it has run out of food, even though demand usually drops in summer.

refrigerators, restaurants and supermarkets.

If just 5 percent of the wasted food was recovered, the report said, it would be more than enough to feed 4-million needy people.

In Citrus County, some businesses give excess food to churches or charities.

The Beverly Hills Publix, for example, gives day-old bread to Daystar's food program.

Dunkin' Donuts has donated unsold doughnuts to the meals program at Living Water, where Pat Altman ate last week.

And the Salvation Army off Grover Cleveland Boulevard recently hit the mother lode of donations: one semitrailer truck loaded with 42,000 pounds of potatoes,

onions and papayas from South Florida.

The truck arrived late last month, courtesy of state Sen. Anna Cowin, R-Leesburg, whose District 11 includes parts of Citrus County, and a Dade County food recovery program called Farm Share Inc.

First dibs on the food went to charity programs feeding the neediest people. Then, the Salvation Army invited others to help themselves. Bianco said the shipment fed close to 1,000 people.

Some of the onions — about one box full — went bad.

But by Thursday, Bianco said, the load was gone.

"There is absolutely nothing left," she said.

CITRUS COUNTY FOOD PROGRAMS

Free meals

- St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Inverness, 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Wednesdays, 726-3153
- Living Water Christian Fellowship in Inverness, noon to 1 p.m. Thursdays, 726-1480
- Inverness Church of God, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays, 726-4524
- First Baptist Church of Crystal River, Meals on Wheels program delivered at 11 a.m. Tuesdays; food bags also available once ev-

ery three months, 795-3367

Bagged or boxed food/food pantries

- Daystar Life Center, near Crystal River, 795-8668
- Citrus United Basket in Inverness, 344-2242
- Salvation Army in Homosassa Springs, 621-5532
- St. Vincent De Paul in Inverness, 726-1707

■ Annie Johnson Center in Dunnellon, (352) 489-8021

■ United in Spirit Christian Center in Inverness, 637-5059

■ Crystal River United Methodist Church, 795-3148

Cooperative program

SHARE Tampa Bay offers people an opportunity to stretch food dollars through volunteer community service work. For information, call Betty at 726-8617.

County's number of hungry growing



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

VISTA volunteer Tina Jollie rushes to put food bags in place recently as the Commodity Food Distribution program prepares to get under way in Inverness. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sponsors the program, which supplies food to those in need.

STACIE MITSCHKE
smitschke@
chronicleonline.com
Chronicle

Although the street corners of Citrus County are not lined with hungry people carrying cardboard signs, many of the county's hungry live each day wondering when they will be able to eat next.

Hunger, although it may not be visibly evident, currently affects a large portion of the county's population.

In Citrus County alone, there are at least 500 people left homeless and even more who are left hungry, said Ruth Falsetti, program coordinator for the Feed My Sheep program at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church.

She added that because of high prices for prescriptions,

the majority of people who use the programs are elderly.

"It's a very real problem, and a lot of people are making that decision every day to either buy medicine or to eat," Falsetti said.

Debbie Lattin, chairperson of Citrus County Harvest — a local food supplement program — said most people are unaware of the scope of the problem in the county. "I think for the most part, people don't have a clue how many people go hungry here every day. I see people doing their best, doing everything they can to make ends meet, and it's just not happening."

Government programs such as welfare may assist eligible recipients in their hunger, but most of the time it is not

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enough, county Director of Support Services Anne Westbrook said.

Fortunately, there are several supplemental programs in Citrus County to combat hunger.

The Commodity Food Distribution program, for example, orders food from the Department of Agriculture for up to 700 families every other month throughout the year, and relies on volunteer efforts to transport the food and assist with bagging.

The program attempts to give each family a grocery bag with at least 14 different food items, both perishable and non-perishable.

Last week, the program gave out about 6,526 pounds of food in two locations — one in Homosassa and one in Inverness.

However, sometimes the hardest part of getting the food is swallowing pride, Westbrook said.

"It's a hard stigma for people to overcome," she said. "People think this is a handout

program and they have a hard time overcoming that mindset."

One commodity recipient, who asked to remain anonymous, said that although she has been eligible for years, she has just recently gathered the strength to receive food from the programs.

"It makes you feel very, very bad and sad when you get disabled and you can't get the help you need to get what you need. I've worked all my life and it makes you feel so low to ask for free food. It made me feel like I wasn't worthy. I've been through hell."

Despite the fear of embarrassment, volunteers can help make the experience a little easier.

"They shouldn't have to 'go through' anything. We always try to help them and we try very hard to make the process as painless as possible."

Some of these programs have been going on for at least 25 years, Lattin said, and the need is still growing.

"We can't stop asking because the need is not going away, it's growing," Lattin said. "The sad part is that the need will always be there, so we just have to keep doing what we're doing."

LOCATIONS AND TIMES OF AREA SOUP KITCHENS

- Monday — First United Methodist Church in Inverness at 11:30 a.m.
- Tuesday and Wednesday — St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, Inverness, at 11:30 a.m.
- Thursday — Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Inverness, at 11:30 a.m.
- Saturday — Inverness Church of God at 11:30 a.m.

Churches with soup kitchens or food distribution programs include:

- Christian Kitchen, 746-3420.
- Harvest House, 341-7707.
- Inverness Church of God, 726-4524.
- St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, 726-3153.
- Vineyard Christian Fellowship, 726-1480.
- First Baptist Church of Floral City, 726-4296.