



## QUEENS IS HUNGRY

# Soup kitchens, food pantries stretched to the max

BY [PETE DAVIS](#)

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Jose Carmen Cortez travels from Brooklyn to St. Mark's Church in Jackson Heights every Tuesday to go to the Momentum Project soup kitchen for lunch and to pick up a food pantry bag filled with food he can use for the week. On Mondays and Wednesdays, he goes to Manhattan to a similar program where he can get a hot meal and escape the cold.

"I come here because I don't have money," said Cortez, while waiting in line for soup at St. Mark's on Tuesday, December 1. "This has been a great benefit to me when I'm sick and can't work."

Cortez is only one of thousands of Queens residents who rely on food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the borough, many of which are feeling a bigger burden this year. According to a recent survey released by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCHAH), an astounding 93 percent of Queens agencies reported an increase in the number of people they have served in the past 12 months, while 72 percent of those surveyed characterized the number increased as "great." In addition, 57 percent of the survey respondents said they were forced to turn away people, cut the amount of food they give out or decreased the hours of the program.

Overall, the number of people who used city soup kitchens increased by 21 percent last year, however, federal anti-hunger funding through the economic recovery bill and the food stamp program increased by \$560 million during that period.

"The economic downturn has created a hurricane of suffering for hungry New Yorkers, but the good news is that a massive increase in federal funding has provided a food life-raft for struggling families," said Joel Berg, executive director of the NYCCHAH.

"While it is obviously appalling that more than half of the feeding programs in the city still need to ration food, the situation is far less catastrophic than it would have been had the President and Congress not increased anti-hunger funding in the recovery act and had not protected the Food Stamp Program as an entitlement that expands when times are rough," Berg said.

According to the NYCCAH survey, the populations with the greatest increase in need at Queens emergency food providers were families with children, which increased 46 percent, and senior citizens, which saw a 30 percent increase.

“I come here to get some hot food and also a good bag,” said Luis Martinez, 74, who said he has been going to St. Mark’s for about a year.

While the majority of people who come to soup kitchens are looking for a hot meal and a warm place to stay for a few hours during the day – some clients say the centers provide them with other benefits.

“The staff and the volunteers are excellent,” said Salvador Otero, 44, who found out about St. Mark’s a few years ago after being diagnosed with HIV.

Otero, who is a volunteer at Elmhurst Hospital Center but does not have a regular paying job, said he stopped coming to St. Mark’s for a while as he was battling alcohol. But, when he returned about a year ago, he saw many of the same friendly faces who were excited to welcome him back.

“They really care about the people that come in,” Otero said.

One of those volunteers at St. Mark’s is Bill Sangster. While attending mass one Sunday about five years ago, Sangster heard about the program and decided he wanted to help. Now, every Tuesday, Sangster heads to the basement in St. Mark’s and helps serve meals to the clients.

“I thought it would be something good that I could do to help people in the community,” Sangster said.