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THE NEEDIEST CASES

# When a Wealth of Food Options Dwindles to Two: Eat or Go Hungry

By KARI HASKELL

With specialty food stores and every kind of restaurant, New York is an eater's paradise for the well-to-do. But as the economy slows, more of the city's residents are struggling to pay for rent, utilities and other necessities without scrimping on food. Inexpensive foods are often calorie-dense but nutritionally deficient, and such a diet can contribute to health problems, including diabetes, which is increasing among the poor more than among the wealthy.

More than 1.2 million New Yorkers receive food stamps, a 23 percent increase in five years. And with [food prices](#) rising, more people, including working families and retirees, are turning to food banks and food pantries. According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, emergency food providers reported serving 28 percent more people in 2008 than in 2007. But according to the coalition, nearly 69 percent of food pantries and food banks in 2008 reported not having enough food to meet demand, up from 59 percent in 2007.

The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#) does not directly buy food, but the seven agencies it supports do operate food pantries and cafeterias. Often, drawing from the fund to pay for something else — an electricity bill, clothing or furniture for an empty apartment — means a person need not choose between buying a meal and covering another necessary expense.

Crisis, Strain and Hope: A Family's Balancing Act

Soilange Villagran, 49, tapped on a computer keyboard at the Grace Institute on the Upper East Side. She looked well put together and cheerful, showing little sign of the strain she has been through in recent years.

"I have a concept of presence — it is very important," said Ms. Villagran, a mother of three, during a break from her computer class. But her body aches. She has lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease that attacks normal tissue.

Since her diagnosis in 2000, she has tried to manage her illness while confronting one family crisis after another.

In 2002, her youngest child, Diana Guijarro, now 11, struck her head on the concrete during school recess, causing brain damage. The accident changed her daughter from an outgoing child to one who tires easily and needs regular stimulation and therapy to improve her cognitive skills.

The same year, her husband's sister died of cancer. Anguish struck again in 2003: her oldest children, Marcy Palacios, now 22, and Christian Palacios, now 23, were critically injured in a car accident. Their recovery was sure but slow. Both are now in college.

More recently her husband, George Guijarro, 47, suffered a severe heart attack. No longer able to carry heavy equipment, in 2007 he lost his job as a contractor. "I feel that we are fighting — swimming against the waves," she said, then adding more hopefully, "but then something comes."

Being accepted to the Grace Institute, she said, is affirmation that good things can happen. The institute is a beneficiary of [Catholic Charities](#) of the Archdiocese of New York, one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

She found out about the agency last fall. Her husband persuaded her to accompany him to a job fair. While he was inquiring about a new career with the United Parcel Service, a job counselor gave her a number for the Grace Institute, which offers office training and administrative placement for women. The next day she went to their offices, where she took a typing test and was interviewed. She qualified for a scholarship. "I felt like I won the lottery," she said.

While she studied, her husband continued his efforts to find work. They used his \$400 in weekly unemployment benefits to pay the \$750 rent on their one-bedroom apartment — a reconfigured storage room in Queens where they live with their youngest child — and utilities. But there is little left for groceries: \$80 every two weeks to buy lentils, beans, sardines, bread and, her biggest extravagance, milk.

In October, Ms. Villagran could see that the financial strain was affecting Diana, who was becoming more despondent.

At the Grace Institute, a social worker offered help. "She really needed a coat and something educational," said Ms. Villagran. They were items the family once could afford, but their money now goes exclusively to necessities, like putting food on the table.

Through Catholic Charities, Grace Institute was able to secure \$250 from the Neediest Cases Fund for a new coat, some other clothes and music therapy — in the form of seven piano lessons — for Diana. “It made a difference immediately,” Ms. Villagran said. “The piano wakes her senses and helps on her self-esteem.”

Then, in the second week of December, Mr. Guijarro’s unemployment benefits ended.

For the first time, Ms. Villagran lined up at a church food pantry, and she applied for emergency food stamps.

But just when things looked bleak, they got better. On Dec. 24, she learned that the Grace Institute had collected \$160 for her. With that money she was able to pay a few bills and buy a \$20 drugstore Christmas tree and a small bounty for a Christmas dinner.

Shortly after, an extension to her husband’s unemployment benefits was approved. And she learned that the Neediest Cases Fund would cover the fee for her husband’s commercial driver’s license exam.

Their future looks brighter now, Ms. Villagran said. She will graduate on Feb. 2. With her certificate from the institute, and her husband’s opportunity to get a new license, she is optimistic that they will find jobs.

“I would like work in a hospital or a nonprofit,” she said. “I know I can be helpful to people who have been in pain. I understand what they have been through.”

In Learning to Serve Others, Building a Skill Set to Serve Oneself

Shatara Nieves is awakened by her mother at 6:30 a.m. She takes her 1-year-old son to day care before arriving at the [Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service](#) on Schermerhorn Street, where she takes part in a food-service training program for learning and developmentally disabled adults.

She washes her hands, puts on a hairnet and ties on a plastic apron before getting to work.

“When I first started I was nervous,” said Ms. Nieves, 22. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Now, after about six months of training, she feels at ease in the long, narrow kitchen. She can scramble and fry eggs and make toast, and knows how to properly present a meal on a plate before giving it to the customer. “Now I feel great,” she said.

Ms. Nieves is one of nine employees of a cafeteria that is operated by clients for clients. Their instructor, Herma Markland, who has managed the cafeteria for eight years, teaches them the importance of punctuality and to work together: collaboration is important in a kitchen. They also clean the grills and the refrigerated cases, and wash all the dishes.

On average, the cafeteria workers prepare 100 to 150 hot meals each weekday, earning earn \$3 to \$4 an hour. Ms. Nieves dreams of working at McDonald’s. At a fast-food restaurant, she could earn minimum wage, \$7.15 an hour.

But the cafeteria is not just a training ground for aspiring food-service workers; it is also part of the agency’s goal of improving the lives of its clients, most of whom have a psychiatric or developmental disability. A hot, nutritious meal at the bureau’s first-floor cafeteria plays a crucial role in keeping people healthy and stretching scant incomes a little further.

Those in the day rehabilitation program, which offers vocational training and skills required for independent living, and those in Project Moving On, which offers counseling and support, receive vouchers for the meals, but those in workshops and a skills training program pay \$1.75 per meal.

A comparable lunch — consisting of a hot entree, a piece of fruit and a beverage — would cost three times as much outside the bureau, said Daniel Giuseffi, coordinator of skills training.

The menu varies; on a recent Wednesday, the staff was preparing baked chicken wings and macaroni and cheese. “We have a focus on wellness,” Mr. Giuseffi said. The cafeteria follows state and federal nutritional guidelines. “We are getting more and more away from fried foods,” he added.

Sensitive to the clients’ limited means, Mr. Giuseffi strives to keep the cafeteria prices low. But this past year, with the rise in food costs, the \$7,000 monthly budget was falling short. The cafeteria is not subsidized by the government and does not make a profit. It seemed Mr. Giuseffi’s only choice was to raise the prices for the meals.

Then the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service came up with a solution: The bureau, one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#), decided to draw \$350 a month from the fund to cover the increase in costs.

Michael Montgomery, who has been a client in Project Moving On for the past four years, is thankful that prices remained unchanged. “My

money is tight,” he said. “It really helps.”

Even a small increase might mean that some patrons would choose not to eat, Mr. Giuseffi said. “Nutrition is an important part of education. By providing an affordable meal, it really gets their day started right.”

#### \$74 in Food Stamps Doesn't Go Far Enough at the Grocery Store

Around the 10th of the month, Margaret Callahan maneuvers a small cart down six flights of stairs to the supermarket one block from her one-bedroom apartment in Astoria, Queens.

As she pushes the cart slowly down each aisle in the store, she surveys her choices, checks prices and calculates how much she can afford on the \$74 that she receives monthly in food stamps.

She also considers her diabetes, she said. “If I eat stuff I'm not supposed to, my body acts up right away.”

“I buy some vegetables, milk, fruit, cold cuts,” she said. “I try to buy stuff on sale as much as I can.”

At the register, she swipes her food stamp debit card and taps in a PIN. (Paper coupons were replaced with electronic benefits and debit cards starting in 1994.)

Food stamps, plus \$1,200 a month from [Social Security](#), is all she has to live on. “I have no savings, no bonds, no C.D.'s. Nothing.”

Ms. Callahan, 64, who is single, had to stop working in 1992 because of poor health. She had been in the accounts receivable department at Smith Barney for nine and a half years. “I just couldn't deal with asthma attacks — I was in the hospital all the time,” she said. In addition to diabetes and severe asthma, she has high cholesterol.

“I have good medical coverage, but I have to pay a co-pay,” she said. After paying \$563.96 for rent and her utilities, she said she has barely enough to cover co-payments for medications, leaving little for emergency or discretionary purposes.

“My check doesn't go so far — it only stretches so much.”

More often than not, the food stamps do not last the month, she said. Then she dips into her emergency pocket money. On occasion, she says, she borrows from friends. “It is not much — I borrow \$20 here, \$20 there, but that is it.”

“But I have to pay them back, and they never have to come look for me; I always go looking for them,” she said.

Living on such a tight budget, she has come to depend on her church. In the 29 years that she has lived in the apartment, she has attended St. Joseph's [Roman Catholic Church](#) in Astoria. Every Thursday night, she is there, her cart in tow, to receive a bag of food: canned soup, macaroni, spaghetti, fruit and sometimes a loaf of bread. She has also relied on a food pantry, run by [Catholic Charities](#), Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, in the Queens North Community Center. Catholic Charities is one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

“I don't go there very often; only at the point my back is against the wall,” she said.

Because of the economy, more people are visiting the food pantry, said Sha-nae Anderson, Ms. Callahan's caseworker.

Ms. Anderson added that money from the Neediest Cases Fund helped Catholic Charities provide people in distress with emergency money so they do not have to choose between eating and paying bills. Last summer, it was a choice Ms. Callahan feared she might have to make.

Ms. Callahan's asthma requires that she use air-conditioning during the hot months. She managed to pay her high summer Con Edison bill but not her entire Verizon bill.

Ms. Anderson used \$123.99 from the Neediest Cases Fund to pay for Ms. Callahan's telephone arrears.

“I really need my phone,” Ms. Callahan said. “What if I have to call 911?”

#### How to Help

Checks payable to The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund may be sent to:

4 Chase Metrotech Center, 7th Floor East, Lockbox 5193, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11245.

All gifts are acknowledged; special letters are not possible. Checks intended for a particular Neediest agency should be written to and mailed to the agency, noting that it is a Neediest gift.

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The Times pays the fund's expenses, so all contributions go directly to the charities, which use them to provide services and cash assistance to the poor.

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To delay may mean to forget.

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