

Pols tout rescue plan for city food banks

by Paul Leonard, Assistant Editor

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'Tis the season of unprecedented need at the Hour Children Food Pantry in Long Island City.

Food is disappearing off the shelves. Lines of hungry people snake out the door. Talk of tough times is punctuated with worries of darker days to come.

Hour Children isn't alone. In Queens, a whopping 77 percent of food pantries don't have enough supplies to meet soaring demand, according to an annual survey by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. Meanwhile, 64 percent of the facilities feeding the borough's hungry are limiting portion size, reducing hours and turning people away.

Countless others simply turn back when confronted with long lines outside city food banks, according to advocates for the hungry.

"I've never seen it this bad in my 20 years working in food pantries," said Christy Robb, director of Hour Children's community outreach programs.

To help address the growing need, last week Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) announced a three-point initiative in the hope of heading off a widening hunger crisis, already affecting many communities throughout the nation.

Appearing at the Hour Children Food Pantry on Nov. 26, Schumer unveiled his proposal to tie hunger relief to the second economic stimulus package currently before Congress.

At least \$50 million allocated by the proposed bill would go to The Emergency Food Assistance Program, allowing the federal government to purchase commodities that would be distributed to food banks across the country.



Councilman Eric Gioia, left, and Sen. Charles Schumer at the Hour Children Food Pantry in Long Island City. (photo by Paul Leonard)

The other two points of Schumer's hunger initiative are a permanent tax-break for corporate food donations and a 10 percent increase in funds to keep an estimated 28 million New Yorkers from losing their food stamp benefits this year.

"This plan will be a shot in the arm for food banks and pantries by increasing needed federal aid, encouraging people to donate, and boosting food stamp support," Schumer said.

However, federal food relief wasn't likely to come in time for the holidays for thousands of city families struggling to put food on the table.

A feeling of helplessness is evident among those gathered at the Hour Children pantry, waiting for food. "This place is important because we are dependent of everything we get here," said Frances Divito, a resident of nearby Astoria Houses.

There's also plenty of anger.

In the pantry parking lot, L.I.C. resident John McKee spat on the ground when asked about government's response to the current economic crisis. "They only care about the big guy," McKee said. "There's no room for us on the lifeboat."

McKee said he'd been laid off from his job at a Maspeth car repair shop in the past year.

Inside Hour Children Food Pantry, the spectre of the federal government's massive \$700 relief package for the banking industry was hard to ignore. "There's plenty of people going to Washington asking for bailouts," said Councilman Eric Gioia (D-Sunnyside). "But nobody needs a bailout more than hungry Americans."

The increase in need caught even veteran hunger advocates by surprise. Food pantry visits in the city are up roughly 25 percent from a year ago, according to Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "What was once a trickle has become a tidal wave," Berg said.

Though volunteers are often welcome at the city's food pantries, advocates say it is free professional services that facilities like Hour Children need the most. "Anybody can ladle out food," Berg said. "What we really need are graphic designers, computer programmers and accountants to donate their time."

Despite the economic gloom, there was hope that President-elect Barack Obama will be more proactive on hunger issues than the Bush administration. But advocates were taking no chances, urging residents to write Obama letters and emails in support of Schumer's hunger initiative. "We need people to act with their heart and their head," Berg said.