

# Times get tough, but food banks find a way

By Beth Lawrence

Local shoppers are not the only ones feeling the pinch at grocery store checkouts. Food banks are also dealing with increased costs.

The cost of food in April was 9.4 percent greater than in April 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That cost is expected to continue rising.

"In 2022, food-at-home prices are predicted to increase between 7 and 8 percent," a USDA report said.

Those rising costs mean increased pressure on personal finances already stretched thin.

"Lately, with the food prices we have picked up a lot in the last two months," said Karen Johnson, United Christian Ministries director. "April last year we saw 117 households, this year we've seen 240. March, we saw 187 last year, this year we've seen 252."

Director Paige Christie sees the same disturbing trend in The Community Table's numbers.

"We went up in January and February about 40 percent," she said. "In April and May, we're just climbing. On meals from December until now, we're a little more than double, and the individuals using our services as far as the (food) boxes, that is probably up 45 percent."

Christie has also noticed an increase in the number of families with children requesting help.

In May alone The Community Table saw 73 new

families needing food a total of 199 people, 70 of whom were children.

Both UCM and The Community Table are seeing increased costs on supplies they buy locally and from MANNA FoodBank.

Christie's costs have doubled for the same amount of supplies purchased from MANNA since November and December. They doubled again from March to April.

Johnson is seeing new clients who say their bills are covered, but they can no longer afford food due to rising fuel and food prices.

"Transportation cost are up, so that gets passed along," Christie said. "People are stressed. Jobs are there, but they're still not paying what they need to pay for this area. Rent is through the roof. Times are tough."

Christie worries if gas prices rise so high that lower income people spend more on gas to get to work than they make, that food pantries could see another crush of new clients.

Still, she says they will find a way to provide.

"We'll figure it out," she said. "It means I'm hunting more grants; it means I'm looking for more money. We're not going to stop what we're doing."

"I'm less concerned with us being able to figure out a way to afford food simply because we live in such a generous community. I'm very concerned about the people who come to us not being able to get to us because they can't afford the gas to get to us."



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## Help with other expenses

UCM also helps with rent and utilities. Johnson often sees people facing the age old conundrum of those who struggle – whether to pay bills or buy groceries. They come to UCM for help with rent not realizing they can also receive food.

"They can forget that we're a food pantry," Johnson said. "I tell them also, 'If you will come here every two weeks for food and take the food money and pay your bills, it works out better.' And they look at me like it's a brand-new idea."

UCM and The Community Table receive donations from supermarkets.

In grocery store donations, largely produce and bakery items, Johnson has seen the impact of increased food costs in a different way. A recent donation was larger because people aren't buying indulgences.

"Our donation from Walmart over Memorial Day weekend was astronomical because Walmart had bought and prepared for the holiday weekend and said people are only buying the essentials," Johnson said. "They're not buying the other stuff the cakes, the cupcakes; they're not buying the pineapples. So, we've been getting a lot of that overflow from Walmart and Food Lion."

Johnson also points out that items such as paper towels, hygiene products and laundry detergent are

not covered by food stamps. When even the cost of shampoo rises, it impacts one's financial means.

"They're coming here for that a lot lately because it's so expensive," she said. "There's four cars out there right now."

## Protein shortage

Both UCM and the Community Table are experiencing shortages on meat, meaning less protein sources for clients.

"There's a couple of things going on with some of our sources," Christie said. "One is there's still an availability problem on certain items. We're getting less meat in because MANNA's getting less meat in."

That means food banks are faced with the choice of not supplying meat or purchasing it from other sources that will charge more than MANNA.

There are ways to help. Christie suggests checking on neighbors, offering them rides to food banks or picking up food boxes for those without transportation or who cannot afford fuel.

She also requested financial and food donations as well as boxes to accommodate the increased need.

To donate or request assistance from UCM call 586-8228 or visit 191 Skyland Drive, Sylva; for The Community Table call 586-6787 or visit 23 Central St., Sylva.